

AFTER ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPTS

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Abstract:

In this study I examine the theory of essentially contested concepts by W.B. Gallie. Since the publication of Gallie's seminal article "Essentially Contested Concepts" (1956), the theory of essentially contested concepts has received a wide attention from the theorists of surprising dissimilar positions. Disputes over the actual scope and intent of Gallie's original theory have sprung forth while other commentators have attempted to revise and reinvent the theory so that the original insight of Gallie could be salvaged; some researchers have rejected the project outright as misguided. The evaluation of these contributions, considerations and criticisms compose the main bulk of the treatise.

The central question specifically addressed is, does Gallie's notion lead to radical and undesirable relativism not originally intended by him? If that is shown to be the case, it would have a detrimental effect on the motivation and rationale to even have meaningful definitional disputes over the concepts essentially contested in the circumstances in which no correct definition of socio-political concepts is attainable in once-and-for-all sense.

I will argue for the view according to which Gallie can, indeed, be seen to commit himself to the problematic form of relativism although the ambiguity of his overall theory leaves some room for interpretation. Nonetheless, I consider the insight behind his theory to be valuable and interesting to the extent that the complete overhaul of the theory is in order. For that purpose I propose an alternative way of conceptualizing the phenomenon of essential contestability as socially determined. The pervasiveness and intractability of the socio-political debates involving central socio-political concepts are now claimed as having their source in the attempts of individuals to defend and define the contours of their respective forms of life with the use of the very same concepts. These concepts are seen central to the normative frameworks of persons resolved to keep the integrity of their identities as unified and stable as possible. The conception of transitional rationality illustrated by Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre plays a crucial role in making sense of the rationality of conversion from one conception to another in the situation characterized by essential contestability.

Keywords: essentially contested concepts, conceptual contestability, definitional disputes, transitional rationality, identity, form of life.

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Tiivistelmä:

Tutkielmassani tarkastelen W.B. Gallien teoriaa essentiaalisesti kiistettävistä käsitteistä. Gallien vuonna 1956 julkaiseman merkittävän artikkelin ”Essentially Contested Concepts” jälkeen teoria essentiaalisesti kiistettävistä käsitteistä on saanut osakseen laajaa huomiota keskenään hyvinkin erilaisista lähtökohdista asiaa lähestyviltä teoreetikoilta. Gallien alkuperäisen teorian tosiasiallista sovellutusala ja tarkoitusta koskevien kiistojen lisäksi jotkut kommentoijista ovat pyrkineet muuttamaan ja uudistamaan ko. teoriaa, jotta Gallien alkuperäinen oivallus pystyttäisiin turvaamaan, siinä missä toiset tutkijat ovat tyrmänneet koko projektin lähtökohdiltaan jo vääräksi. Näiden kontribuutioiden, huomautuksien ja kritiikin arviointi ja esittely muodostaa suurimman osan tutkielman sisällöstä.

Keskeisenä kysymyksenä, johon pyritään erityisesti vastaamaan, on: johtaako Gallien esittämä käsitys radikaaliin ja epätoivottavaan relativismiin ilman hänen sitä alkuperäisesti tarkoittamatta? Mikäli tähän johtopäätökseen päädytään, sillä olisi vahingollisia seurauksia motivaatiolle ja järkevyydelle käydä mielekkäitä kiistoja, joiden tarkoituksena on määritellä essentiaalisesti kiistettävien käsitteiden merkityksiä, olosuhteissa, joissa yhdenkään sosiopoliittisen käsitteen määritelmää ei voida lopullisesti todeta oikeaksi.

Tulen argumentoimaan näkökulman, jonka mukaan Gallien voidaan todellakin nähdä ajautuvan ongelmalliseen relativismiin, puolesta, vaikka hänen teoriansa kaiken kaikkiaan jättää jonkin verran tilaa tulkinnoille. Tästä huolimatta katson hänen teoriansa perustavan oivalluksen olevan arvokas ja kiinnostava siinä määrin, että kokonaisvaltainen teorian tarkistus on paikallaan. Sen vuoksi ehdotan vaihtoehdoisen tavan käsitteellistää essentiaalinen kiistanalaisuus sosiaalisesti määrittäneeksi. Väitteeni mukaan sosiopoliittisten debattien, jotka pitävät sisällään sosiopoliittisten käsitteiden käyttöä ja arviointia, läpitukenisuus ja hankaluus nähdään nyt aiheutuvan yksilöiden pyrkimyksistä puolustaa ja määritellä elämänmuotojensa ja –tapojensa rajoja samaisia käsitteitä käyttämällä. Nämä käsitteet ovat keskeisiä oman identiteettinsä eheyden säilyttämiseen vakaasti pyrkivien henkilöiden normatiivisille viitekehyksille. Charles Taylorin ja Alasdair MacIntyren esittämä käsitys transitionaalisesta rationaalisuudesta on keskeisessä roolissa käsityksen vaihtamisen selittämiseksi tilanteessa, jota määrittää essentiaalinen kiistanalaisuus.

Asiasanat: essentiaalisesti kiistettävät käsitteet, käsitteellinen kiistanalaisuus, määritelmäkiistat, transitionaalinen rationaalisuus, identiteetti, elämäntapa.

FOREWORD

It's a universal truth amongst university students that wrapping up the master's thesis takes an almost inhuman effort from its author. The same is true for this work which most certainly has been a long time coming. A couple of times I have written chapters after chapters only to realize that the text on the screen so far is substandard and the only real option left is to throw it all away. One is one's own severest critic to be sure.

But now I have something acceptable on the paper. By acceptable I mean that it is somewhat interesting and not just a summation of the work done by authors clearly cleverer than the writer. The work might still be of a low quality but at least it is something to own up. That's a start. My sincere wish is that the motto I have chosen for this project comes true eventually: It kind of makes sense when you DO think about it.

There are lots of people to thank for. The present thesis is, in a more way than one, a result of countless everyday discussions with various people. You know who you are. However, special thanks go to my supervisor, Arto Laitinen, for his useful advice and, especially, considerable patience with me. I also want to thank my parents for their mental and material support throughout my studies. I couldn't have done this without you. Most importantly, I want to thank my wife, Anne, who has to endure my rants daily. Quite often, her comment after my, usually tiresome, outburst has been "it sounds reasonable when you say it, but..." The force of the "but" can be rather overwhelming. Thank you, Anne, I hope the contestation goes on till the end of our days.

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ABSTRACT

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A philosopher once had the following dream.

First Aristotle appeared, and the philosopher said to him, "Could you give me a fifteen-minute capsule sketch of your entire philosophy?" To the philosopher's surprise, Aristotle gave him an excellent exposition in which he compressed an enormous amount of material into a mere fifteen minutes. But then the philosopher raised a certain objection which Aristotle couldn't answer. Confounded, Aristotle disappeared.

Then Plato appeared. The same thing happened again, and the philosophers' objection to Plato was the same as his objection to Aristotle. Plato also couldn't answer it and disappeared.

Then all the famous philosophers of history appeared one-by-one and our philosopher refuted every one with the same objection.

After the last philosopher vanished, our philosopher said to himself, "I know I'm asleep and dreaming all this. Yet I've found a universal refutation for all philosophical systems! Tomorrow when I wake up, I will probably have forgotten it, and the world will really miss something!" With an iron effort, the philosopher forced himself to wake up, rush over to his desk, and write down his universal refutation. Then he jumped back into bed with a sigh of relief.

The next morning when he awoke, he went over to the desk to see what he had written. It was, "That's what *you* say."

(A joke found on the Internet, allegedly from Raymond Smullyan, *5000 B.C. and Other Philosophical Fantasies*, St. Martin's Press, 1983)

1. INTRODUCTION

The present thesis is divided in three main chapters in which I examine the claim that there exists a group of concepts central to the process of making sense of the social reality whose usage is often, if not always, controversial and, thus, contested. In chapter 2, I examine the notion of *essentially contested concepts*. The phrasing was coined by Walter Bryce Gallie in his essay, “Essentially Contested Concepts”, which was originally published in 1956. Since then his theory has received rather broad attention from philosophers and social scientists of surprisingly dissimilar positions. The main point of the theory of essentially contested concepts is, as the title implies, that there are disputes about certain political or social concepts, the disputes which are intractable and seemingly endless. Although the same concept is at issue, there are various uses and criteria of application of the concept that are evidently in direct conflict. No single use of the concept can be set up as the correct or standard use in a sense that all participants involved in a debate about the definition of the concept would, or even could, arrive at the single definition even if sufficient time and care would be invested in conducting the debate. Most of all, the dispute is not caused by “metaphysical afflictions” or deep-seated psychological causes¹. Despite the endlessness of contestation, the dispute can be characterized as a genuine, not as a confused, one.

Thus, in chapter 2, I outline the theory of essentially contested concepts by discussing seven basic conditions proposed by Gallie. In a case of each condition I present applicable support and objections accordingly. The examination is restricted to points made directly for or against Gallie’s original theory. However, some considerations mentioned have broader connections to the issues more thoroughly elaborated in Chapter 3. In these cases I refer to the following discussion with footnotes. The references to the works of theorists directly criticizing or supporting some or another part of Gallie’s theory are the ones I deem most relevant. Although this requires certain choices which could be made otherwise I am confident that no glaring omissions are to be found. After having gone through the seven conditions laid out by Gallie, the rest of the chapter is dedicated to a more general criticism levied against Gallie’s project that concerns his enterprise as a

¹ The advent of “unconscious” in the psychological studies of early to mid-20th century—most famously illustrated by Sigmund Freud—was a new perspective to look at background motivations of individuals employing certain conceptual interpretations unsettling the previous theories oriented around reason. Hence, Gallie’s theory of essentially contested concepts can be seen as an attempt to salvage the philosophical notion of practical reason then in jeopardy.

whole. For the purposes of the present study the most notable issue revolves around the question of whether Gallie's theory commits oneself to radical and undesirable relativism, and if so, for what reasons. I also discuss the relation of social particulars to the phenomenon of essential contestability. The last section of chapter 2 is reserved for various remarks regarding the theory of essentially contested concepts which serve the purpose of assessing the pros and cons of the theory critically. In this section I also introduce the main question examined in the next chapter. However, the actual conclusions concerning the plausibility of the essential contestability thesis, in general, are left at the very end of the thesis. In the course of the chapter I will argue that one can find redundant elements in Gallie's original theory as economical as it is. Moreover, the vocabulary used is quite misleading—even straightforwardly confused—at times directing the focus of the reader to unfruitful avenues. Standing on the shoulders of giants makes one humble but there are certain advantages as well which becomes evident when the criticism presented against the theory over the years is appraised.

After preliminary examination of the theory of essentially contested concepts, I turn my attention to the phenomenon of essential contestability hoping to provide the rough outlines of a thesis of essential contestability that is not susceptible to the criticism levied against Gallie's original theory. "The big question" of chapter 2 demanding for an answer is to assess the nature of what is at stake in pervasive disputes between persons favoring one interpretation of a concept over another while disputing opposite definitions. I put forward an argument connecting these disputes to the humanly vital task of making sense of the world and one's particular place in it. The focus is thus shifted from concepts to persons using and interpreting the concepts. Although Gallie did not advocate a conception of essential contestability that directly links the pervasive disputes—which are reasonable despite the lack of one correct outcome—to the questions of personal identity, I argue strongly for the need to make such a revision since it helps us also to understand the rationality of conversion from one preferred view to another when neither can be given priority in absolute or objectively impartial sense². The conception of rationality put forth in the third chapter is of pragmatic and transitional character which will hopefully be enough to satisfy the critics claiming that the thesis of essential contestability leads automatically to the vices of relativism or should be denied as fallacious due to defeating

² This requires moving away from the strict confines of Gallie's original theory while trying to develop the notion of essential contestability further. Luckily the work of the scientific community in trying to understand the issue hasn't ceased after Gallie, to make an understatement of gargantuan proportions.

itself by self-reference. The heightened understanding hopefully achieved is a result of the dialectical tension between the issues confronted and possible answers that can be given. Needless to say, the conclusions I draw and the conjectures I make are highly contestable as the general tone is much more speculative than in the previous chapter. It must also be noted that not that much consideration is given for alternative perspectives as I rush to establish the arguments needed for a viable thesis. The general phenomenon of essential contestability—the pervasiveness of disputes involving concepts that are supposedly essentially contested—is approached from the perspective not often employed while discussing Gallie’s original theory, but as it is so often the case, few claims to originality can be made.

Chapter 4 is, primarily, about the conclusions regarding the plausibility of Gallie’s original theory and its scope of application given the considerations and criticism encountered in the course of the study. Although I leave the final say about the “correct” way to interpret Gallie’s original intentions to the reader I will offer some rudimentary outlines for the thesis of essential contestability I myself would consider fruitful starting point for a further research. It is concluded, that one should not treat or see the social and political concepts, as such, essentially contestable, but to envision essential contestability as emerging from complex relationships between people with personal aspirations to make sense of the world possibly overlapping with the aspirations of others in wider contexts such as communities and traditions each defining and defending the contours of their respective forms of life. Needless to say, these socially embedded persons with commitments regularly encounter other people who do not share their preferred standards of evaluation which results in more or less serious conflicts in which the opposing parties argue for the superiority (even in absolute sense) of their views while denying, possibly vehemently, the notions of others. Instead of claiming the existence of some group of concepts having certain characteristics rendering them essentially contestable (and being identifiable as such), the web of human relations within which identities are built, sustained and altered given the particular circumstances is seen as the locus of meaning giving rise to various descriptions with differing appraisals of significance. Although it is not plausible to identify certain concepts as elementary for human understanding—that kind of conjecture would certainly betray the original insight in implying conceptual essentialism—it can be argued that it is more than possible to identify some human

practices for which the existence of conflicts and disputes are necessary from our current historical perspective and self-understanding³.

In the end of the chapter 4 I also outline several outstanding questions for further research. After all, the amount of work that can be done within the practical restrictions of the present study is limited and no claims of comprehensiveness of examination are warranted concerning the theoretical framework in which essential contestability is seen as resulting from the interplay between personal identities and respective normative frameworks. Most of these open questions are examined in another study, “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012)⁴, but a quick look on some relevant considerations is in order. As it turns out, there are a healthy lot of questions and problematics to consider further, a fact not remarkably surprising considering that one is dealing with the matters of practical reasoning and human condition.

The general method used in this research is familiar to philosophers of every stripe. I start by an account regarding certain phenomenon—in this case the essential contestability as it is laid by W.B. Gallie—and analyze it in the light of various contributions for and against it. I try to find some outstanding issues not answerable straightaway through the material at hand. Consequently, I widen the examination in respect of what I deem questionable and worth further analysis by bringing still more notions and theories to the table. By positioning the different conceptions in relation to each other I will try to clarify the original issue in question. Hopefully, in the end, the thesis provides a better understanding of the issue and various problematics associated with it. If I end up stating the obvious I hope, at least, to have done it in a way which brings different outlooks and positions together. My method is, in short, dialectical.

I’m not interested in who is right and who is wrong although some observations of the sort are made from time to time throughout the thesis. What I am really occupied with

³ Political discourse and inquiry, for instance, seem to be this kind of practices (although, in the future, it is possible that the collective mentality changes in this respect). It is worth noting that the political discourse or vocabulary as a whole is not essentially *contestable* despite the opposite claims made by some notable theorists; it is only within such discourse and practice connected to the self-understanding and life-forms of actual embedded persons that we can perceive essential contestability and make some sense of it. This issue is discussed in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012) more extensively.

⁴ Although the present study can be read separately from “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” its purpose is to provide a starting point for further research on the issues related to essential contestability. By that I do not mean to downplay the significance of the arguments established here, indeed, if it is to be shown that the central observation, namely the conjecture that the phenomenon of essential contestability should be viewed as socially determined instead of seeing the source of seemingly endless socio-political disputes in certain characteristics of some specific group of concepts, presented in the present thesis is seriously flawed, the rationale of the perspective embraced later on is jeopardized.

is what essential contestability as a supposedly inescapable phenomenon tells us about the relation between man and the world. Besides that somewhat lofty goal I hope to answer the following, more specific, questions: 1) does the notion of essentially contested concepts by Gallie lead to an undesirable relativism; 2) can we even conceive a contestation with no end in sight as rational; and 3) is there a better way to characterize the elementary reasons for the phenomenon of essential contestability? Although some of the general issues I have with the theory advocated by Gallie have already been referred to I feel it best to refrain from making any further remarks on the matter for now.

Throughout the text I will employ the terms ‘social’ and ‘political’ as practically interchangeable when referring to the group of concepts I am concerned with in the study. Every social concept can be politicized and every political concept *per se* is surely a social one in some respect. It’s worth noting that I do not include adjectives ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ in this grouping although a case can be made that they do not differ from ‘social’ and ‘political’ in any relevant sense. The reason for this stems from the apparent phenomenon that in everyday speech situations ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ are most often used in a much more objectivistic sense or perhaps as demanding “objective status” on the part of their interpreters and users. Since the (personally) perceived modality of the concept has an impact on how a person uses the concept it might be best to keep these groups separate at least for the time being. Also, during the course of the study a reader encounters a prolific usage of terms ‘ambiguous’ and ‘vague’. I am aware that these terms have their established analytical uses in describing certain problematics when trying to define the meaning of the terms or concepts but I use them usually as common adjectives to describe an indeterminate and fuzzy character of social and political concepts in a sense that they appear as such to their users and interpreters. When the analytical use is meant by either term it is accompanied with a clarification “in a strict sense”⁵.

Despite certain indisputable misgivings of “Essentially Contested Concepts” it is an article well suited for reappraisal bespeaking an honest attempt to gain further insight into matters of most ordinary kind. At the time of its publication there still prevailed a definite rupture between “the old order” of positivists and “the new generation” of

⁵ For the excellency summary of the analytical differences between these terms, see *Vagueness in Law and Language: Some Philosophical Issues* (Waldron 1994).

linguistically oriented theorists⁶. It is an interesting formulation of a position in an interesting period in the social sciences, one which can still help to elucidate certain central issues of the social scientific research. Gallie's original theory can be seen as a direct descendant of the late Wittgensteinian ordinary language theory, and as such particularly opposed to essentialism in conceptual usage, even though his preferred vocabulary differs from that of Wittgenstein⁷. Gallie argues for the view that there are several uses and criteria of concept's application in direct conflict in the case of essentially contested concept which can be seen to mean in Wittgenstein's terminology that each particular use is embedded in a language game or a form of life. For Gallie, these concepts have "no one clearly definable general use... which can be set up as the correct or standard use" (Gallie 1956a: 168). Because of these Wittgensteinian roots any theory of essential contestability treats conceptual essentialism with suspicion which, however, is not supposed to commit oneself to the radical relativism despite the fact that some (post-modernist) theorists have indeed embraced rather radical position concerning the ability to define concepts by attaching meanings to them for similar reasons.

The notion of essentially contested concepts has become an integral part of professional know-how of political theorists, especially in Anglo-American tradition⁸.

⁶ The 20th century heralded the rise of phenomenology as well which can be seen as a natural reaction to a changed perceptions about a human subject, identity and existential status of "being in the world". It was no longer considered plausible to try to picture the world as it objectively exists outside a framework of human understanding. The apparent failure of the positivism both in the social sciences and in the philosophy of language has promoted more subjective understanding of human endeavors in general. Academic researchers have become well aware of the intertwined connection between facts and theories i.e. a theory cannot be separated from its object, thus, it cannot be conceived as giving us neutral or value-free knowledge or understanding. As far as concepts themselves are concerned, it has been argued that one cannot separate descriptive element from a normative concept, thus conflating the fact/value distinction. That discussion is still mostly undecided and is not included in the present thesis despite its significance.

⁷ I find the reasons illustrated by Andrew Vincent to be convincing in this regard (cf. Vincent 2004).

⁸ In Finland, the discussion concerning the topic has been very limited, at least by Finnish authors, as far as I know. Few articles in which the issue has been discussed to some extent have been published in *Redescriptions: yearbook of political thought, conceptual history and feminist theory*. Gallie has earned some brief mentions in couple of master's theses and one section in a dissertation whose title is, not surprisingly, "Uusi perustuslakikontrolli" (Lavapuro 2010; English translation for the title would be "The New Constitution Control"). It is indeed the context of constitution interpretation in which Gallie's ideas have been made known by Ronald Dworkin and Jeremy Waldron, for instance. For those wishing to translate the term "essentially contested concept" to Finnish, I can offer a couple of points why I personally favor the translation "essentiaalisesti kiistettävä käsite". First, I am aware that "essentiaalisesti" is an awkward translation but it serves its purpose for connotative reasons. Another good candidate would be "perustavanlaatuisesti" but I have rejected that because of the need to emphasize *essentia*, or the aspect of essence. What comes to "kiistettävä", it is used instead of "kiistanalainen" because of the need to track the issue related to the differentiation between "contested" and "contestable", the distinction that is not made by Gallie himself—although, as I will argue for in the study, the proper terminological use would be "contestable" (Fin. "kiistanalainen") to refer to the type of concepts Gallie is evidently meaning. In general characterizations of the issue the term "kiistanalainen" is not objectionable, in my opinion. Then again, "kiistettävä" is preferred over "kiistetty". The reason for that stems from the need to highlight the active

Nowadays, it is commonplace to start a discussion about practically any social or political concept by referring to Gallie's original essay at first often claiming that this or that concept is essentially contested. Andrew Vincent, for instance, has remarked that "(E)ssential contestability... has not so much been rejected or refuted as subsumed into the subconscious of political studies. It now simply 'crops up' as a relative background commonplace of vocabulary that students of politics are expected to know something about" (Vincent 2004: 108). The number of this kind of references (especially in social sciences) to Gallie is staggering⁹. Naturally, the opinions about the impact and importance of the original conception are divided but often cited direct influences include Ronald Dworkin's (1977a)¹⁰ discussion of the contested concept and competing conception phenomenon, H.L.A. Hart's (1961) treatment of justice and, most famously, the distinction

nature of the dispute. "Käsité" is a somewhat obvious translation although one could use "käsitys" when referring to a situation in which one conception of a concept is contested, perhaps even essentially.

⁹ Jeremy Waldron points out that in the law review literature, especially, "the use of the term has run wild, with "essentially contested" meaning something like "very hotly contested, with no resolution in sight"" (2002: 148–9) identifying 43 terms that have been described as "essentially contested" (ibid. fn.31). Actually, the comprehensive list of all suggestions made by social scientists would be much longer with new terms being included in the group all the time. It would be non-sensical to list all concepts that are supposedly essentially contested. There is more than a grain of truth in the assertion made by Eugene Garver according to which "it [the term 'essentially contested concept] has been theorized about more than used, and appealed to more often than thought about" (Garver 1990: 251, brackets added). It seems that "essentially contested concept" has become a catch phrase to be included for the purpose of giving certain credibility to a research that starts by noting that there are lots of different interpretations resulting in various descriptions concerning the issue i.e. the term is commonly used in a non-essential sense to simply state that there are rival ways of interpreting the matter. Although the purpose of my treatise is not to wage war against this kind of use, it is interesting to see how the matter turns out to be and what would be the correct and reasonable use of the term.

¹⁰ For the distinction between concept and conception, and about concepts admitting competing conceptions, see (Dworkin 1977a: 103; 134–36; 226–227). Also, see (Guest 1991: 35–36) for the relation between Dworkin's and Hart's interpretations of Gallie's original thesis. Michael Stokes (2007) has outlined a couple of noteworthy intersections and differences between Gallie and Dworkin concerning the rationality of conversion from one conception to another and the possibility of best conception instead of correct conception (in once-and-for-all- manner) that are certainly interesting and important in more sense than one but it is not possible to evaluate these matters within the scope of the present study. For those interested in Dworkin's theoretical framework and preferred terminology I recommend his text *No Right Answer?* (1977b).

between a concept and a conception employed by John Rawls (1971: see esp. 5; 198)¹¹. Andrew Vincent (2004) sees a somewhat straightforward continuum between ordinary language theories and essential contestability, on the one hand, and later theories attempting to recover normative and justificatory sphere of political philosophy that could overcome the relativist tendencies of essential contestability. “Essential contestability was thus the *hors d’oeuvres* to the substantial main course of the concept, which although initially internally contested, could be finally resolved within a normative theory. Thus, classical normative theory *returned* again anointed with analytical oil” (ibid. 109)¹². In Gallie’s original argument, the confusion about the concept’s status as shared is avoided by reference to commonly accepted ‘exemplar’ which allows the meaningfulness of debates. This exemplar was easy to interpret ahistorically as common core held by the concepts such as ‘justice’. Now the matter became to what that common core exactly is. (see also Vincent 2004: 132–133).

Before moving forward, a couple of preliminary remarks about what this study is not about should be made. First of all, the connection between socio-political concepts and ‘ideologies’ is not assessed here although there is certain similarity between subscribing to an ideology and having a stance concerning an ‘essentially contested’ concept¹³. Secondly, many important linguistic issues of mostly analytical concern are not included in the study. For instance, I am not interested in analyzing to what extent the phenomenon may be due

¹¹ It is worth noting that I am not interested in the relation between a concept and a conception, or in the technical use of that distinction with various consequences and problematics. For the discussion of essential contestability specifically in relation to concept/conception distinction, see Mark Edward Criley’s dissertation about the subject (Criley 2007). In addition, although the distinction between a concept and a conception by Rawls is often seen as being directly influenced by Gallie’s theory, the similarities in approach do not stop there. In *Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical* (1985) Rawls articulates the matter in the following way: “...the conception of citizens as free and equal persons, need not involve, so I believe, questions of philosophical psychology or a metaphysical doctrine of the nature of the self” (ibid. 230–1). Despite the fact that this particular phrasing is practically identical with Gallie’s position (Gallie 1956a: 169) it has been overlooked by the commentators. To see Rawls’s normative philosophy as resting on the framework resembling that of Gallie could help to answer the question why Rawls himself has always rejected the notion that the conception of justice presented in *Theory of Justice* should be seen as grounded on a metaphysical notion. One could then view Rawls’s assertion of “the fact of pluralism” as a direct result of a general notion of essential contestability.

¹² Nowadays many political theorists see, to a large extent, the study of political theory as the examination of the political concepts used. That goes to say that the primary interest is in political inquiry, not in actual political institutions and practices. Even wider group of researchers posit language as a constituent of politics and/or politics as the constituent of language. Actually, after the linguistic turn in the 20th century one would be hard-pressed to find even a single influential theorist not embracing the central place of language in the formation of the phenomenon we simply call ‘politics’. Even if the emphasis put on different aspects of language varies, it is not uncommon at all to come across political handbooks explaining what the concepts used in politics are *actually all about* which can be seen as an echo of the normativization of political theory.

¹³ For those interested in this kind of approach I would recommend Michael Freedén’s *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (1996).

to semantic indeterminacy of concepts used in everyday political language¹⁴. Thirdly, throughout the thesis I try to avoid of connecting essential contestability to a certain theory of meta-ethical nature. In that vein, I also try to remain as neutral as possible concerning the ethical implications of a thesis of essential contestability regarding “the right way of arguing for one’s views” in debates having no clear resolution in sight. Naturally, *prima facie* judgments, in that regard, could be made but that would be a matter for another study.

¹⁴ Naturally, one cannot escape linguistic concerns when the primary attention is on ordinary language. There is, however, reason to believe that phrasing of the issue in linguistic terms does not provide us with an insight of special status. One can argue that all supposedly essentially contested concepts (as terms) are by nature polysemous, but since there is no definitive test available to determine its status as such without a recourse to speaker’s judgments about relatedness we have to look for an answer elsewhere.

2. ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPTS

To start with, let us consider some common concepts generally used in social sciences and political philosophy: justice, democracy, freedom and power. These concepts are vague, ambiguous and general in nature i.e. they are sort of major concepts that gain their specific content in reference to wide array of other concepts and empirical considerations. Due to their ambiguous nature there is constant debate about their proper use and meaning. One could say that a contestation of these concepts is a consequence of a failure to specify the relationship between ‘term’ and ‘meaning’ bringing about straightforward confusion in their proper application. Needless to say, sometimes researchers employ the concepts inconsistently or fail to grasp the definitions formulated by other theorists. In this case, the confusion in question is quite easily resolvable. Given sufficient amount of time and good will the scientific community will arrive at correct definitions of these pesky concepts enabling more coherent research and setting new bright era in a study of social sciences.

However, the apparent failure of positivist social science hints us of other possibilities. What if the concepts in question have some unique characteristics rendering the meaning of the concepts, if not incomprehensible, then at least contestable in such a degree that an uncovering of the one ‘correct’ meaning is not possible at all? Three distinct possibilities emerge at once: either the conceptual nature of the concepts as linguistic terms referring to some vague socio-political phenomena is such that the proper understanding of meaning is not even logically conceivable; obscure phenomena to which social and political concepts are referring are by their nature such that a satisfying human consensus based on the correct understanding is unattainable; or an interpretation of a concept is coloured or even slanted by some reason traceable back to an interpreter. Thus, the big question is “what is the source of contestability?”

Notwithstanding the often likely confusion about the proper relationship between a term and its meaning, the third possibility (of the ones listed above) focuses attention to strong normative valence associated with the kind of concepts like ‘democracy’ or ‘justice’. This normative valence, combined with other relevant considerations, causes the users to champion a particular use or interpretation as opposed to other “wrong” alternative interpretations of concept favoured by other users. How informed the users are seems to play practically no role in the issue since academic researchers as well as “laymen” act alike in this respect more often than not. Even if there’s a difference, I would dare to say,

the academicians are less likely to be convinced of the views opposing their own. In practical life people often regard this kind of disagreement as a conflict of interests or tastes. Reasons given by opposing parties are then seen as psychological rationalizations of private interests which can be viewed as somewhat incommensurable. When philosophers and researchers of social sciences, who persist in maintaining that there is a proper definition, meaning or application for a term, hold profoundly differing views it is usually taken to be a sign of a deep-seated difference in (metaphysical and/or epistemological) worldviews or perspectives. And usually for good reasons, I should add. Apart from this, even after the realization that the disagreement is not likely to be resolvable the debaters, academicians or laymen, in their respective trenches continue to insist that their own use is the correct one instead of trying to work out the verbal disagreement. But is it just a matter of verbal disagreement or something more profound?

Consider disagreements about ‘democracy’. In Western societies, democracy and democratic government are widely considered as positive things helping to bring about positive ethical and political consequences in society *if* the democratic society in question is *truly* organized by the *right* standards paying homage to the *correct* interpretation of the democratic ideal. In fact, the positive normative valence associated to the concept of democracy is so great and widely acknowledged that perceived deficiencies in the government of the particular society are not usually thought as a failure of democracy *per se* but as a wrong application and/or interpretation of the democratic ideal¹⁵. This leaves room for various political parties and interest groups to advocate issues they consider as important by contesting the proper definition of ‘democracy’ itself. As Russell Hanson (1985) has characterized the situation:

“The struggle to control the definition or meaning of democracy in order to legitimate (or criticize) institutions and practices “in the name of democracy” is, therefore, one of the most important aspects of American [and World] political history—one that is trivialized by objectivist accounts that focus on progress toward some transhistorical ideal of democracy” (Hanson 1985, 5–6, brackets added).

Curiously enough, the contestation of ‘democracy’, in everyday politics as well as in academic discussions, often takes the form of appealing to a particular ideal of

¹⁵ Amartya Sen, for instance, maintains that democracy is and should be viewed as a universal value although “(T)he idea of democracy as a universal commitment is quite new, and it is quintessentially a product of the twentieth century” (Sen 1999: 4). Whether Sen’s claim can actually be maintained is not relevant here as we are interested specifically in the question of how the democracy is viewed as something more than a *mere* regime (cf. Sen 1999).

democracy which is seen authoritative and at least somewhat transhistorical. It is surprising how often, in everyday discussions about the correct meaning of democracy, one or more participants turn to view Athens in Ancient Greece as setting “base line” for democratic participation¹⁶ despite an apparent anachronism. I do not mean to imply that the concept of democracy is transhistorical, quite the contrary, but in the process of arguing for one’s held convictions the exemplary cases are often invoked and recognized as giving assertions argumentative force. Strikingly, various interest groups and political parties use and refer to the same exemplary cases in order to validate their own views which can be hugely dissimilar with the views of other disputants by their actual content. While acknowledging the value of democracy as positive and worth striving for the disputants differ over the relevance and import of the criteria commonly associated to it. For example, which is more important, a direct participation in an actual setting of political agenda or guaranteeing the representation of citizens’ interests in decision-making procedures¹⁷? Especially, when considering other socio-political concepts such as ‘justice’ along with relevancy and import of various criteria associated to it, it seems that the ensuing dispute between the persons of opposing views is intractable in a sense that it seems to be unresolvable due to differing values held by the participants as “overriding”, or even as incommensurable¹⁸. The situation here is starkly different from that of natural sciences where differing views are due to varying methods of experimentation, or, due to general epistemological reasons. What is important is not the possibility or plausibility of demarcation between natural and human sciences but our common assumption that in the case of latter we deal most notably with values generating different perspectives, the perspectives which in themselves are not easily articulable. Can it be so that the concepts of human sciences are *in principle* open to endless contestation?

¹⁶ This seems to be true at least in the European context. However, other societies may have some other “prime examples” which are often referred as is the case with citizens of the United States who commonly refer to the intentions of the Founding Fathers and to the constitution.

¹⁷ Milja Kurki has discussed the contestability of ‘democracy’ from the specific view point of democracy promotion in her article “Democracy and Conceptual Contestability: Reconsidering Conceptions of Democracy in Democracy Promotion” (Kurki 2010). She also links the issue directly to essential contestability although the theoretical underpinnings of the notion are not examined with the depth needed. Nonetheless, her article serves as a good summary of different ways ‘democracy’ is nowadays interpreted theoretically.

¹⁸ It is worth remarking that my purpose is not to try to resolve or clarify the various problematics associated with value pluralism. Nonetheless, since I hope to say something meaningful about the intractability of the debates involving ambiguous social and political concepts, a pluralistic point of view is necessary and unavoidable.

Walter Bryce Gallie (1912–1998) introduced the idea of ‘essentially contested concepts’ in 1956¹⁹ to address these issues. His article offers an explicit definition in form of seven basic conditions for identifying and understanding the nature of elusive social and political concepts like ‘democracy’. The notion of ‘essentially contested concept’, coined by Gallie, has been widely influential ever since. As is the case with many notable theorists Gallie has gained some followers but even more critics. In my opinion, Gallie’s notion is interesting as it sheds light to philosophical disputes in general and points to rather surprising avenues not presumably intended by him. My main purpose in this chapter is to outline the original view championed by Gallie and to confront his theory with the most notably criticism leveled against it during the last half a century. It hopefully becomes evident that although his general outlook to essentially contested concepts is reasonable there remain several matters to be clarified and some points where the theory needs to be augmented. Perhaps the most pressing question to be asked is whether the approach outlined by Gallie encourages undesirable conceptual relativism? What exactly is the value of his contribution? Does it provide necessary tools for understanding and analyzing social concepts or does its value lie elsewhere?

The nature of pervasive disputes involving ambiguous socio-political concepts *needs* to be explained *neither* in terms of psychological causes *nor* metaphysical afflictions to use Gallie’s expression.

“...there are disputes... ...which are perfectly genuine: which although not resolvable by argument of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence. This is what I mean by saying that 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” (Gallie 1956a: 169).

Gallie’s focus is on the normative character of social and political concepts. He offers seven different but overlapping conditions which provide a basis for exploring the nature of these concepts. The conditions are: (I) the concept 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) “the accredited achievement is *initially* variously describable”, (IV)

¹⁹ W. B. Gallie, “Essentially contested concepts” (1956a). Gallie applies the idea in “Art as an Essentially Contested Concept” (1956b) and some further refinements are included in his subsequent book, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding* (1964). However, neither of the latter two provides a conclusive perspective to the original issue presented in “Essentially contested concepts”.

“the concept of any such achievement [is] “open” in character”, (V) reciprocal recognition of their contested character among contending parties; “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” that can be said to anchor conceptual meaning, and (VII) “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”. The first four characteristics are “the most important necessary conditions to which any essentially contested concept must comply”. Conditions (I) to (V) give “formally defining conditions of essential contestedness. But they fail to distinguish the essentially contested concept from the kind of concept which can be shown... ..to be radically confused.” For that purpose conditions (VI) and (VII) must be included²⁰. (Gallie 1956a: 171–2, 180.)

In following sections I will clarify in greater detail the exact nature of the preceding conditions of essentially contested concepts. Over the course of years many commentators have augmented, criticized and sometimes flatly rejected Gallie’s original views²¹. I will take these different notions into consideration and evaluate their theoretical soundness compared to Gallie’s original notion. At the same time my personal viewpoint on the subject begins creep into the fore. My intention is to summarize points presented earlier and to assess the points in need of further elucidation view in section 2.9.

2.1 Condition I: Appraisive character

The essentially contested concept is “*appraisive* in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement” (Gallie 1956a: 171). In “Art as an Essentially Contested Concept” Gallie also uses the expression ‘achievement word’ to describe the term that refers to the concept (Gallie 1956b: 109). For example, the concept of democracy

²⁰ If the concept in question is a “confused concept”, the dispute involving the concept can be characterized as *merely verbal* i.e. it is resolvable at least to some degree by conceptual reframing which unmask the apparent confusion and leads to conceptual clarification. Different strategies can be employed to unmask the verbal nature of the dispute. For insightful analysis of verbal disputes, see Chalmers (2011). However, it is not enough to simply state that the essentially contested concepts are not confused concepts. I have discussed this matter in length elsewhere (Pennanen 2012).

²¹ A rather extensive summary of positions held by various commentators can be found in “Essentially contested concepts: Debates and applications”, *Journal of Political Ideologies* (October 2006), Vol. 11, Issue 3, 211–246 by Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu. I, on the other hand, concentrate on the issue at the level of philosophical arguments for the theory and regard its somewhat abstract implications for practical philosophy and social sciences as a whole. However, to get a clear basic picture of various positions about the subject of essentially contested concepts their article is arguably the most compact one.

“has steadily established itself as *the* appraisive political concept *par excellence*” (Gallie 1956a: 184). Thus, Gallie means the expression “achievement word” in a quite literal sense: in the case of ‘democracy’ the point is to state that democracy is something people tend to see as worth aspiring to—for its beneficial pragmatic effects on society, for example. Indeed, he is right to point out that when judging major policy decision the primary question often is: is it democratic? Democracy is nowadays seen—at least from the Western point of view—as a worthy goal of a society to aspire to, or as ‘a valued achievement’²². Whether one values democracy for itself or because it has valuable consequences seems to play no significant role in Gallie’s theoretical framework²³. It is simply something that is valued.

The basic point made by Gallie is widely acknowledged as valid among commentators. Positive normative valence attached to some social and political concepts seems to play key role in setting the scene for disputes about the proper meaning of these concepts. Some serious omissions, however, are found. To begin with, in “Essentially Contested Concepts”, and in subsequent works thereafter, Gallie does not cover the possibility of negative valuation of appraisive concepts at all. It’s doubtful whether he would have objected to it. Be that as it may, it seems pretty clear that many appraisive concepts are also used to ascribe negative valuation to something or someone. Gallie himself seems to be pointing in that direction when saying that “to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively” (a part of condition V). Consider the label ‘liberal’ in the United States today. Whether one uses the term to ascribe positive or negative valuation to a person or a practice (or policy) appears to

²² Throughout centuries the meaning of democracy has shifted notably. According to Buchstein and Jörke (2007) ‘democracy’ was a negative concept in the theories of many classical thinkers. “This negative usage continued uninterrupted from the Middle Ages to modern times... ..positive connotation became gradually accepted after the French Revolution... Today the transition to a positive concept is complete, at least in western societies and the concept has developed into a category of self-description in global political disputes.” (Buchstein and Jörke 2007: 183–4.) Michael Greven (2009) asserts that democracy “seems to be recognized as a universal normative concept, in politics as well as in mainstream political science” (Greven 2009: 83).

²³ The achievement referred to is of an internally complex character, “for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole” (Gallie 1956a: 171–2). With that assertion in mind, I interpret Gallie as making a rather commonsensical point: the conflict between disputers of a definition of a concept results in conflict, when disputants actually value some achievement and disagree about the definition of the concept denoting that achievement because other definitions, when accepted, would lessen the perceived value of the achievement, whatever the reasons behind that valuation are. If this sounds a bit odd or too complicated considering the fact that Gallie is supposedly listing some *characteristics of concept*, I have to concur with that assessment. However, I have to ask the reader to be patient and wait until all conditions proposed by Gallie have been examined.

depend solely on a normative framework of a person using the term. Naturally, there are lots of similar terms used in a similar way (e.g. ‘communist’, ‘feminist’, ‘neo-liberal’ etc.).

Newton Garver (Garver 1988) suggests an alternative line of thought which admittedly fits better with Gallie’s original vision about essentially contested concepts. He extends the idea of essential contestability to ‘violence’. This way he tries to illustrate that a concept like ‘violence’ fulfills the criteria laid by Gallie with one exception: the appraisal is strongly negative. Whereas in a concept like ‘justice’ a valuation seems to be practically always positive, ‘violence’ rouses a sense of negative valuation as nearly as often—or it needs to be coupled with a term that reverses its meaning forming often rather bizarre combinations like ‘justified violence’ (distinguished from ‘necessary violence’ etc.)²⁴.

Secondly, although Gallie pretty extensively covers the normative dimensions of the essentially contested concepts he doesn’t explicitly point out that to use an essentially contested concept is at the same time to ascribe value to a referred object and to describe it. This is a view point stressed by William Connolly. "Essentially contested concepts... ..are typically *appraisive* in that to call something a 'work of art' or a 'democracy' is both to describe it and to ascribe a value to it or express a commitment with respect to it" (Connolly 1993: 22). Connolly goes on to assert that "to describe a situation is not to name something, but to characterize it... A description does not refer to data or elements that are bound together merely on the basis of similarities adhering in them, *but to describe is to characterize a situation from the vantage point of certain interests, purposes, or standards*" (ibid. 22–3). This notion of relation between a description and an appraisal of a concept needs further clarification. Connolly’s conception, if found reasonable, has a serious impact on the traditional way of seeing the conceptual grammar²⁵.

Michael Freeden (1996) has a similar point in mind when he states that “concepts may have empirically describable and observable components that may *in addition* be conceived of as desirable and thus become values” (Freeden 1996, 56). Freeden also argues that Gallie collapses two meanings of ‘appraisive’ into one without differentiating an intension of a concept from an extension of a concept. (Freeden 1996: 56–7.) On the

²⁴ For example, Eric Reitan (Reitan 2001) applies the notion of essential contestability to the concept of ‘rape’ in his article “Rape as an Essentially Contested Concept”.

²⁵ Or as Charles Taylor has observed in “Interpretation and the Sciences of the Man” (Taylor 1985), challenging the distinction between “evaluative” and “descriptive” can be seen as a refutation of traditional empiricism. In general, the matter of fact/value distinction and the notion of “disentanglement” by Bernard Williams (1985) is not discussed in my treatise.

face of it, Freedman seems to be right. The matter is examined in section 2.7 when the actual scope and application of Gallie's theory is taken under scrutiny more closely.

2.2 Conditions II and III: Internal complexity and diverse descriptibility

The first condition stated that an essentially contested concept "signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement". The second condition set by Gallie stipulates that "this achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole". From the second condition it follows that "the accredited achievement is *initially* variously describable." (Gallie 1956a: 171–2.) It's easy to see that the conditions (II) and (III) are tightly interrelated. Gallie himself presents these two conditions together when discussing the concept of democracy (ibid. 184).

For an essentially contested concept to be internally complex means roughly that the concept consists of various, often overlapping criteria²⁶. This becomes clear when Gallie applies his theoretical framework to 'democracy'. "The concept of democracy which we are discussing is internally complex in such a way that any democratic achievement (or programme) admits of a variety of descriptions in which its different aspects are graded in different orders of importance" (ibid. 184). For example, to call something 'political' or part of 'politics' could mean a lot of things depending on the criteria given to it. Policies backed by a legal authority are usually regarded as political. On the other hand, we often consider motives behind acts and decisions as political; a politician downplaying his previously stated position on cutting farming subsidies, while trying to gather the support of farmers, can be said to act politically. Therefore we don't consider traffic control exercised by the police as a political act even if its legitimacy is based on legally binding decisions made by government. However, if the traffic control in

²⁶ Some commentators refer to the seven basic conditions set by Gallie as 'criteria'. For the sake of clarity my usage of 'criteria' refers to the content of a concept (or to a content of a conception of a concept) i.e. the substantive content given to a concept or its 'ingredients'. Nevertheless, I should point out that the choice is not simply terminological. William Connolly (1993) develops Gallie's original vision further in his *Terms of Political Discourse*. He introduces the notion of 'cluster concept' to describe the internal complexity of essentially contested concepts more precisely and illustratively. A cluster concept is a concept that consists of several different, yet often overlapping, criteria. I'm arguing that this kind of extension of the original theory follows it very closely in spirit if not in terminology. While applying the first five conditions to his initial artificial example of "championship", Gallie uses the terms like "features" or "component parts" distinguishing them from "descriptions of total worth". So "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" (Gallie 1956a: 172).

question (and subsequently imposed fines) would be purposefully targeted against the political opponents of Home Secretary, the actions taken by the police would be seen as a political harassment. Naturally, there are various different criteria for 'political' like publicity, range of influence, and the extent to which decision outcomes affect the interests or values of particular segments of population. The list offered here is by no means exhaustive.

The third condition, diverse describability, refers to an actual situation in which the criteria of internally complex concepts are often ranked in an order of importance. Spokespersons of multinational companies, for example, usually emphasize the notion according to which only those holding positions of legal authority should be taken into account as political actors while different non-governmental organizations frequently demand for more political responsibility of the companies arguing that actions taken by them affect interests of particular population negatively. Some criteria like "range of influence" and "the extent to which outcomes of action affect people's interests" are relative and their position in the ranking order of criteria can vary accordingly in different situations and contexts. It should be noted as well that an absence of one or more criteria of a given concept does not necessarily make the concept "meaningless" (or in the case of politics, "apolitical"). For example, William Connolly contends that "...we must treat politics as a cluster concept to which a broad range of criteria apply; any large set of these criteria grouped together in a particular act or practice is capable of qualifying the act as political" (Connolly 1993: 14). The same can be said about essentially contested concepts in general. Gallie widens the perspective even more: "Are all worth-while achievements essentially internally complex? That they are seems to me as certain as any statement about values and valuation can be..." (Gallie 1956a: 173). Internal complexity of an essentially contested concept makes it likely that various users of the concept will describe it in different ways and so "...prior to experimentation there is nothing absurd or contradictory in any one of a number of possible rival descriptions of its total worth" (ibid. 172)²⁷.

To state the matter simply Gallie is asserting that there are certain features discernible in some phenomenon or state of affairs (e.g. democracy) to which the interpretation or the use of the concept 'democracy' must conform if it is meant to refer to that phenomenon at all. These features are, however, appraised differently (more weight is

²⁷ I take Gallie's emphasis on the *initiality* of diverse describability to mean "prior to experimentation". This underlies his conviction that certain concepts are *essentially* contested in principle although in actual situations of everyday life (or, after experimentation) actual persons or participants in a debate have committed to one or other ranking order.

put on some features (or “component parts”)) which means that the phenomenon in question can be described in various ways i.e. the features or component parts (“criteria” by Connolly’s terminology) are put in different ranking orders in these different descriptions.

At first look, the conditions (II) and (III) appear to be straightforwardly reasonable. Robert Grafstein (1988) seems to accept the conditions as they stand: “Indeed it is the political character of certain concepts that makes them essentially contestable in the fuller sense. This political dimension transforms a relatively inert divergence between distinct definitions of concepts into an active contest among them... Yes, essentially contestable concepts are value-laden and have a number of alternative characterizations” (Grafstein 1988: 19, 25)²⁸. Some commentators remind that the different criteria or components must be part of the same concept in order for the claim that a concept is internally complex to be meaningful at all. “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. ...in discussions of Gallie’s Criterion II (internal complexity), the possibility that one is working with an over-aggregated concept must be recognized.” (Collier et al. 2006: 217).

However, one must be very careful when disaggregating possibly over-aggregated concepts. In section 3.1 I consider the relation between normative framework of an interpreter of a concept and a concept in itself. If it is to be found reasonable that the normative framework i.e. a moral point of view is the key element which “holds a complex concept together” the disaggregation of a concept is not as a straightforward process as one could surmise. Connolly states that “if we subtracted the moral point from any of these concepts, we would subtract as well the rationale for grouping the ingredients of each together within the rubric of one concept” (Connolly 1993: 29–30). Thus, to assess a relevance of a criterion in relation to a concept is to assess the rationale, given by the normative framework, holding the concept together.

²⁸ Grafstein offers a realist analysis of essential contestability which he claims to give new light on the subject matter. “Yet, why, in academic settings, does this persistently draw people into battle rather than propel them to isolated positions in recognitions of the futility of debate? Why are the forces bound up with essential contestability centripetal and not centrifugal? Realism answers by pointing to the actual political struggles converting definitional differences into conceptual confrontations and the latter into reorganizations of society” (Grafstein 1988: 24–25). I should note that metaphysical underpinning of essentially contested concepts attempted by Grafstein or the evaluation of such an undertaking goes well beyond the scope of my project.

Norman S. Care (1973), on the other hand, points out that although social scientists cannot typically agree on the meaning of some social concepts, nevertheless, ‘practical closure’ halting the contestation of the concept (at least temporally) can be possible²⁹. However, following John Rawls, he argues that “the thesis of essential contestability does not imply that the principles we use [for] moral assessment of institutions and practices cannot be objective or fixed” because “...the arguments about social particulars that make their definition controversial are arguments informed by particular facts about individuals aware of who they are, that is, aware of their special interests, social position, natural talents, and the like” (Care 1973: 21, brackets added). It is rather telling that Care very well realizes the oddness of his argument of not extending his notion of practical closure — which he seems to weigh more than a mere *modus vivendi* — to the realm of morality (ibid. 19–20) but still cling to “a classical view [in which] objective moral principles are those which are reflected in the considered judgments of impartial, disinterested agents” (ibid. 20, brackets added). I assume the reason for this is his (presumed) intention to avoid moral relativism³⁰.

One should keep in mind that the terminology used in the texts of different commentators is somewhat confusing. For example, Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu surmise in their extensive overview of essentially contested concepts that Christine Swanton (1985) “maintains that it is possible to judge some meanings as better than others” (Collier et al. 2006, 217). That very well may be, but the main thrust of her point refers to judging some conceptions of the concepts better than others, not the criteria of the concepts as I have used the terms here. The origin of the confusion lies in the fact that Gallie didn’t initially differentiate “conception” from “concept”. This leaves a room for interpretation but, as I see it, the confusion stems of not properly understanding the distinctions made by Gallie.

Regardless of a need for clarification, most commentators recognize the importance of the conditions (II) and (III). Far from being self-evident, though, the criticism presented concerns mostly the role they play in the overall theory.

²⁹ I will get back on the matter of practical closure in the next section.

³⁰ In section 2.7, I will discuss accusations that accepting the notion of essentially contested concepts means committing oneself to undesirable relativism.

2.3 Condition IV: Openness

With the fourth condition the basic idea behind the essentially contested concepts begins to take form. “(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 I shall call the concept of any such achievement “open” in character” (Gallie 1956a: 172). Accordingly, in order to be an “open” concept the concept in question must fulfill two conditions: 1) its meaning must be revisable in changing circumstances and 2) there’s no way to predict (reliably) the actual substantive meaning the concept has in the foreseeable future. The second requirement seems straightforward enough; we can try to predict the future, but it’s anybody’s guess what will really happen. Despite this apparent fact, there’s an additional point to be inferred. Along with the first requirement, the second condition clearly implies that the linguistic structure of language alone does not determine future meanings of essentially contested concepts or that we have no way of predicting the changes in meanings through linguistic analysis alone. Naturally, this is just a fancy way of saying that many social, political and (perhaps) moral concepts are related to society in such a way that they must be interpreted in a relation to that society.

Concerning the concept of democracy Gallie observes that “democratic targets will be raised or lowered as circumstances alter, and democratic achievements are always judged in the light of such alterations” (ibid. 186). In discussing the artificial example of “bowling championship³¹” Gallie states that “In general no one can predict, at any given time, what level or what special adaptation of its own particular style—what bold raising or sagacious lowering of its achievement-targets—may strengthen any particular team’s claim to be the champions” (ibid. 174). In addition to aforementioned relation to social world Gallie ties the theory of essentially contested concepts to concrete claims presented

³¹ The artificial example of championship “gained by playing a game something like skittles” (1956a: 173) and awarded by the spectators judging the play “from the point of view of method, strategy and style, in a number of different ways” (ibid.) is certainly a curious one. Gallie is picturing a contest in which there are several teams that favor different ways to play the game (sheer speed vs. good use of swerve, for example) hoping to perfect their game while staying true to their original style of bowling (although different skills are certainly needed); these teams want to be the champions in virtue of their characteristics. Since there are no definitive rules dictating the judgments of the spectators, there is no sure way to predict which team is crowned as “the champions” i.e. “what level or special adaptation of its [i.e. a team’s] own particular style—what bold raising or sagacious lowering of its achievement-targets—may strengthen any particular team’s claim to be the champions” (ibid. 174; brackets added). It might be that some conditions favor some teams over others at any given time, but this is liable to change meaning that the conditions of play remain persistently open.

in support of one or another conception of a concept. One can legitimately ask what role rhetoric plays in Gallie's theory? And if there is a place for it in absence of strictly objective standards of evaluation, are the rhetorical attempts to "gain support for one's team" misleading and inappropriate way of arguing in conceptual disputes³²? Moreover, if we follow Gallie's implied suggestion and extend the notion of essentially contested concepts to cover "all worth-while achievements" (Gallie 1956a: 173), do we find ourselves committed to undesirable relativism given the lack of objective standards of evaluation?

Alasdair MacIntyre (1973) claims there is a difference between "natural sciences" and "social inquiry" regarding openness. While natural sciences settle debates "at least temporally and provisionally", "in large areas of social inquiry there are not even temporary and provisional settlements". According to him this is due to debate remaining open about "which the central, standard, and paradigmatic instances of the phenomenon are". All in all, this suggests that "perhaps we have not only essential incompleteness, but also essential contestability in those areas." (MacIntyre 1973, 2–3.)³³

A possibility of 'practical closure' presented previously in section 2.2 plays an obvious role here. Clearly there could be a situation where a wide-ranging consensus about a key concept would be dominant. It is time to dig a bit deeper on the nature of this closure suggested by Norman S. Care (1973) who is surely right in insisting that "in the contexts of various social, political, legal, and educational institutions we, as participants, sometimes achieve at least the temporary 'closure'". What this temporal (most of the time Care uses the term 'practical') closure means is that "we bring debates to an end in these contexts—at least for a time—in such a way as to answer for ourselves certain of the basic questions about the character of our institutions and practices". According to Care we answer "these questions for ourselves as participants in social life... ..and the language in which we express our answers is that of decision, agreement, consensus, ruling, voting result, and the like". In this I heartily agree with Care. The kind of temporal closure illustrated by him is more than likely in many occasions. Nevertheless, the fact that there could be temporal closures in "certain of the basic questions about the character of our institutions and practices" does not make it necessary to abandon the view that, in principle, those closures

³² The topic of rhetoric in relation to essential contestability is discussed in "Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation" (Pennanen 2012).

³³ It is worth noting that caveats demanded below by Norman S. Care and John Gray were originally presented in relation to (and disagreeing with) MacIntyre's influential essay *The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts* (1973).

could be burst open in the future. Care concedes the point: “the fact that we achieve practical closure as participants in social life does not show that the settlements we reach are at all objective... ... in no case do we ever have anything like answers to the questions about the character of the particulars making up our social life that are fixed in such a way as to transcend the circumstances of "our" social life” (Care 1973, 14–5.)

It sounds perfectly reasonable that possible practical closures do not preclude future revisions. According to my interpretation this is also what Gallie means—although won’t explicate—by his condition (IV)³⁴. However, there’s a further implication hidden here. For it seems that the notion of essentially contested concepts, as presented so far, gives a primary status to social circumstances in the concept’s process of modification. One can make a good case for arguing that the changes in the meanings of key social and political concepts affects or transforms the social reality as well as the other way around. This is another example of the kind of matters, I think, that Gallie wouldn’t have refuted but just failed to explicitly articulate.

John Gray (1978) doesn’t consider the condition (IV) as a necessary condition for essential contestability. He asks us to consider different taxonomic systems i.e. classificatory frameworks “which are rivals in that their adoption would make incompatible demands on students of the subject, the choice between which cannot be seen merely as one to be made by definitional legislation appealing to considerations of convenience”. Gray claims that this kind of situation “could plausibly be construed as one in which we had entered an area of essential contestability”. This would require a subject matter of inner stability and clearly demarcated borders so that “the component concepts of the rival taxonomic frameworks are not significantly open-textured”. Gray wants to refocus the attention to the contrast between the use of open-textured concepts in natural sciences

³⁴ While discussing the conditions (VI) and (VII) Gallie’s choice of phrasing the matter seems to contradict my interpretation of his position: “We have seen that there can be no general method or principle for deciding between the claims made by the different teams. To be sure, these steps do not amount to a justification of the claim of any particular team, viz., that its way of playing is the best. Indeed, if they did so the concept of "the champions" would cease to be an essentially contested one” (Gallie 1973a: 178). In my opinion Gallie just tries to emphasize the fact that there are no objective standards apart from the overall process of contestation which, thus, renders certain concepts “essentially” contested. This is evident when one keeps in mind what is at stake in Gallie’s artificial example. “Winning a championship” is just this kind of temporal closure, but still open in changing circumstances in the future. In other words, Gallie uses the word “the best” absolutely in a sense of implying a definitive once-and-for-all description of a concept, not comparatively in a sense that the contingent temporally closed descriptions of a concept possible at some given time have gained considerable adherence. Michael Stokes (2007) argues that the internal logic of concept/conception-distinction—which he equates with Gallie’s project—does not require the possibility of there being “a best answer” to be had, although it does not exclude it either. It all comes down to the conception of rationality attached to the general idea of essential contestability. I’ll argue for one such conception in chapter 3.

and social studies. “By itself, the claim that social and political concepts are open-textured can show only that they may share an essential incompleteness with very many other concepts in diverse areas of thought and practice.” It is the rival uses of the concepts, not their open texture, which qualifies the concept as essentially contested. (Gray 1978: 392–3.) Even if one doesn’t acknowledge Gray’s example of taxonomies as a relevant one—there is reason to believe that the classificatory disputes are merely verbal³⁵—one has to admit that he makes a valid point in focusing attention to rival *uses* of the concepts.

Gray has also raised another issue. He argues that “since most of our empirical concepts are recognizably open-textured... exhaustive statements of verification criteria are no more available in the natural sciences than in ethics and the social sciences” (Gray 1977: 340). But if ‘openness’ of the concepts cannot explain the disputes in social sciences “how are we to account for their intractably disputed character in the social studies in contrast to their consensual use in (normal) natural science?” (ibid. 341).

Although Gallie named the seven characteristics of the essentially contested concepts as “conditions” he didn’t actually claim that, there to be such a concept, all conditions have to be fulfilled as is evident in the latter part of his article in which he applies the framework to “live examples”³⁶. But in the case of the first four conditions he explicitly claims that “these seem to me to be the four most important necessary conditions to which any essentially contested concept must comply” (Gallie 1956a: 172). Of course, one could argue that to be an essentially contested concept, a concept has to be open although its openness doesn’t distinguish it from a larger set of concepts in any special way. But then again, Gray’s criticism would hit the mark if the essential contestability in taxonomic systems is actually the same kind of essential contestability found in elsewhere and in other contexts. However, this can be assessed only after the full account of the theory is presented.

But is MacIntyre’s reasoning on fundamental differences between “natural sciences” and “social inquiry” faulty? Could there be something to help us out to better understand elusive socio-political concepts? To paint the picture very crudely, there might

³⁵ See the article “Verbal Disputes” (Chalmers 2011) by David Chalmers.

³⁶ In the beginning of the article Gallie announces his intention to list “a number of semi-formal conditions to which any concept of this kind must conform” (Gallie 1956a: 169–70; see also fn. 3, p. 174). Some commentators (e.g. Collier et al. 2006) have argued that not all conditions need to be present for a concept to be ‘essentially contested’, but the only thing supporting that conclusion is the above mentioned “live examples”. But shouldn’t one conclude instead that Gallie just fails to find any concept that fits his own model? It may also be that Gallie takes “semi-formal” to mean roughly the same as “something along the lines of the condition thus described” but if that is so, it is certainly a serious flaw in his presentation.

be a general tendency in natural sciences to form axiomatic systems. When we view bits and pieces of theories as being locked in their respective places in overall theory we might assume that there would be more room for provisional closures than in human sciences. Naturally, the following possible paradigm shift would be an outstanding affair, indeed, shaking the very foundations of the field of science in question by demanding new axioms to replace those refuted. In social sciences, however, the systems created stand in a dialectical relationship to one another. To be sure there are paradigm shifts as well, but the form a scientific inquiry takes is dialectical and, as such, concerns the relations of concepts and theories opening up practically limitless number of possible perspectives. The changes in one field of inquiry do not automatically demand changes in others. But as my intention is not to compare or contrast natural sciences with social sciences, it's best to stop here.

2.4 Condition V: Reciprocal recognition

The first four conditions describe the basic characteristics of many, if not most, socio-political concepts. Gallie realized that if the essentially contested concepts were to have any “special” place among other concepts used in everyday life it would be imperative to find some other characteristics to describe them.

“For this purpose we should have to say not only that different persons or parties adhere to different views of the correct use of some concept but (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” (Gallie 1956a: 172).

The passage above clearly shows why the distinction between “a conception of a concept” and “a criterion (criteria) of a concept” is necessary. If the main cast on the stage of essential contestability consists of different (full) conceptions of the concept the situation is very often in a deadlock. For example, one party argues that the only criterion for the correct understanding of the meaning of the concept ‘reality’ is that “it consists of material substance” (and nothing else). The other party will naturally deny this by saying that the correct criterion for ‘reality’ is that “it consists of spiritual substance” (and nothing else). These two rudimentary views could be called as (full) conceptions of reality but it would be idiosyncratic, or at least rather odd, to characterize the situation as a contest prevailing between the parties. Even if someone would want to describe the disagreement

presented as a contest, it wouldn't be an "essential" one in a sense meant by Gallie since there's no future or hope of resolution for the disagreement. However, in a case where disputants 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" there is a chance that one or more of the disputants could be swayed by the arguments of either side. The ranking order can vary but there must be at least some criteria of a concept recognized by both (or more) parties to be valid even if the difference in appreciation is immense.

As the name suggests essentially contested concepts are used in a contest (over proper weighting of criteria). Thus, "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" (Gallie 1956a: 172). Gallie doesn't articulate exactly what he means by the phrase "one's own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses" but I take him to mean that a value of an achievement indicated by a concept is of such significance to a user that she considers it important to maintain her preferred use against other uses. Interestingly, in a real world example of essential contestability disputants on one side might perfectly well think that because of a differing ranking order of criteria those on the other side don't value the achievement the concept signifies enough. The discourse ensuing can be colorful and the tempers of the disputants may get the better of them but that speaks for Gallie's theory, not against it.

Quentin Skinner (1989) points out that even if participants agree about the criteria for applying an appraisive term, "a second type of dispute can arise over its use: a dispute about whether a given set of circumstances can be claimed to yield the criteria in virtue of which the term is normally employed" (Skinner 1989: 13). Such a disagreement is not merely a linguistic one "for what is being contended in effect is that a refusal to apply the term in a certain situation may constitute an act of social insensitivity or a failure of social awareness" (ibid. 13). Skinner uses an example of "wives in ordinary middle-class families at the present time" whom suffer from "exploitation":

"The social argument underlying this linguistic move might be characterized as follows. It ought to be evident to all persons of goodwill that the circumstances of contemporary family life are such that this strongly condemnatory term does indeed (if you think about it) fit the facts of the case. Conversely, if we fail to acknowledge the application of the term *exploitation*—in virtue of its agreed criteria—is indeed appropriate in the circumstances, then we are willfully refusing to

perceive the institution of the family in its true and baleful light” (ibid. 14).

The situation characterized by Skinner is by no means extraordinary. On the contrary, there are innumerable variants conceivable. The fact that Gallie doesn’t examine this option is an obvious oversight from his part³⁷. The contention that the kind of “failure of social awareness” illustrated in the example is a “psychological explanation” of the issue not sought by Gallie is clearly unsatisfactory. It is true that “an act of social insensitivity” can be explained by psychological reasons but it can be explained by other reasons (of social or normative character) as well. It seems that Gallie’s condition of recognition needs to be extended. Contesting parties must also share (at least partially) an understanding of how the criteria are applied in concrete cases—i.e. in which circumstances the criteria are pertinent—as well as an recognition of “the fact that its own use of it is contested by those of other parties”.

Collie, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (Collier et al. 2006) point out that “proponents of a particular conceptualization may not explicitly acknowledge contending variants of the concept, thus violating this criterion.” However, this shouldn’t be seen as a problem for “a concept’s status as essentially contested” because “this criterion is not always pertinent” (Collier et al 2006: 219.) Here I have to disagree with their generous reading. If it can be shown that the first four conditions (I-IV) don’t distinguish essentially contested concepts from other concepts used in any significant way and yet forthcoming conditions (VI-VII) don’t fare any better—at least without notable revisions, as I will argue—the “special status” of essentially contested concepts disappears from sight or at least needs much theoretical work to back it up some other way.

Gallie recognizes the clear need for this condition as well:

“Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly likely, but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question; whereas to regard any rival use as anathema, perverse, bestial or lunatic means, in many cases, to submit oneself to the chronic human peril of underestimating the value of one's opponents' positions” (Gallie 1956a: 193).

³⁷ It can be argued that this oversight stems from the theoretical perspective Gallie takes on the issue of essential contestability. I will return to this matter in section 3.1 where I attempt to provide a theoretical framework that has more resources to deal with these sorts of considerations.

Gallie goes on to point out that as a consequence of reciprocal recognition one might expect “a marked raising of the level of quality of arguments in the disputes of the contestant parties” (Gallie 1956a: 193). I return to this matter while discussing condition (VII) but it is worth noting that Gallie seems to implicitly advocate an ethical view here since to fail to recognize the value of one’s opponents’ positions properly would mean “to submit oneself to the chronic human peril”. Since the nature of essentially contested concepts is open it is not easy to interpret what else Gallie means by a “permanent potential critical value” in the situation one lacks the objective standards for deciding which use of a concept is the best (in an absolute sense).

Michael Freeden (1996) claims that the reciprocal recognition is an irrelevant condition in a sense that with “Gallie’s deliberate use of ‘contested’ rather than ‘contestable’ suggests actual conflicts on a level of ideational awareness”. The concepts need not be contested to be essentially contestable and in ideological practice “it is quite possible for a concept to be contested with no awareness, or limited awareness, on the part of the testers” (Freeden 1996: 60.) Freeden discusses Gallie’s theory of essentially contested concepts in the context of ideologies. He notices that “the mutual recognition is, of course, a prerequisite for the philosophical discussion of an essentially contested concept” (ibid. 60) but the same is not required of ideological expression.

It seems to me that Freeden is right as far as it goes. If one considers ideological expression, for example, as a performative political act and as such analyzable, it is not necessary to require a political actor to be aware at the ideational level. A cry for freedom is not necessarily a cry for the correct ordering of the criteria of the concept of ‘freedom’. However, Gallie’s purpose was not to suggest that it is. What he tried to do was “to show that there are apparently endless disputes for which neither of these explanations [psychological or metaphysical] *need* be the correct one ...there are disputes, centred on the concepts which I have just mentioned, which are perfectly genuine: which, although not resolvable by argument of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence” (Gallie 1956a: 169).

It would be ridiculous to interpret Gallie as saying that every dispute or argument where essentially contested concepts are involved transforms the awareness level of disputants and the criteria claimed to stand for that concept by its users to conform to Gallie’s theory of essentially contested concepts. Of course, I don’t mean to imply that Freeden really claims so. But one has to be careful where one is treading. When I remarked above that a cry for freedom is not necessarily a cry for the correct ordering of the criteria

of the concept of freedom, it isn't necessarily the case that the valued achievement which the concept of freedom signifies is any different in these instances. Jeremy Waldron points out that one should expect there to be "a greater variety of reflective involvement in the use of the concept" (Waldron 2002: 162) i.e. one should not try to view the issue in a way that unifies the perspective of a researcher with that of a participant in a given dispute. Of course, he is not implying that the researcher has a privileged perspective compared to that of lay-man. It just happens that we (all of us) use different concepts with variable reflective precision at times. "The verdict of essential contestedness does not stand or fall with everyone's being aware of it; it stands or falls with the way it helps us understand all that goes on at the various levels at which people use a concept and reflect upon their use of it" (ibid. 162). All in all, Waldron is advocating a position concerning essential contestability, the position according to which there is no need to require participants to identify an essentially contested concept in order to explain the rationality of its use, or the supposedly beneficial results gained while participating in these sorts of contests³⁸.

It is now pertinent to raise an issue that concerns the vocabulary chosen by Gallie. Barry Clarke (1979) points out that:

"To say a concept is contested is to suggest that it is, or will actually be, contested; to claim otherwise would be to claim not that the concept was contested but that it was contestable. The phrases 'essentially contested' and 'essentially contestable' are frequently used as if they were interchangeable. But this is clearly incorrect usage, for to refer to a contest is to refer to a current state of affairs or to some definite future event; whilst to refer to something as contestable is not to make a definite claim that it is actually contested but rather to say that there is some property about the referent which may (or may not) give rise to some contest at some future time" (Clarke 1979: 124).

Clarke is right in his assessment, of course, but it has no substantial impact on the overall picture, in my opinion, at least for now. Nonetheless, the use of 'contestable' instead of 'contested' by Gallie would have prevented many misunderstandings. While many, if not all, essentially contested concepts are, in fact, contested, there remains a logical possibility that the empirical contestation of one or another concept may temporally come to halt or even achieve a fixed (and yet, temporal) status as a term with clear definition. In that case, the situation could be characterized as 'practical closure' following

³⁸ This is also the position I personally argue for elsewhere although I attempt to ground the issue on how socially embedded persons actually argue for certain views while presenting their reasons (backing their preferred notions) to the universal audience (cf. Pennanen 2012).

the terminology provided by Norman S. Care (see esp. section 2.3). Clarke's assertion about there being "some property about the referent which may (or may not) give rise to some contest at some future time" (ibid.) making a concept 'contestable' in principle is a cue for us to look for that property. So far we have attempted to elucidate the specific nature of the group of concepts supposedly essentially contested. With the advent of the condition (V) the focus is suddenly shifted from the nature of concepts to participants contesting a particular use of it. Is the referent causing (in a loose sense) an actual contestation found *in* these type of concepts or are we better off to look for it elsewhere³⁹?

2.5 Condition VI: Original exemplar

Gallie claims that conditions (I) to (V) give "formally defining conditions of essential contestedness". Ignoring the phrase 'essential' for now I assume Gallie to mean that the first five conditions describe the parameters of the situation one could call a contest or a dispute involving an essentially contested concept. He clearly sees that to distinguish disagreements about essentially contested concepts from other disagreements whose source may lie in confusion, or from other uses of concepts, more substantive conditions must be interpolated into the theory. "[Conditions (I) to (V)] fail to distinguish the essentially contested concept from the kind of concept which can be shown, as a result of analysis or experiment, to be radically confused" (Gallie 1956a: 180, brackets added). In order to disentangle the essentially contested concepts from "radically confused concepts"⁴⁰, Gallie adds two more conditions.

Condition (VI) is "the derivation of any such concept from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept" (Gallie 1956a: 180) which can be said to "anchor" (a term not used by Gallie) conceptual meaning. Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (Collier et al. 2006) are right to point out that there seems to be a "narrow" and a "broad" interpretation of the original exemplar employed by

³⁹ So far, I claim, no such referent has been found. In the next sections I cover Gallie's last two conditions for essentially contested concepts neither of which provides any clear referent located *within* the concept deemed as essentially contested. I will try to frame a substantive answer to this question in the next chapter in which I leave the confines of Gallie's original theory while hoping to grasp the general phenomenon of essential contestability more comprehensively.

⁴⁰ When participants of a dispute use a "radically confused concept" it simply means that they are using different concepts altogether although both think they are employing the same concept. That would be a case of conceptual equivocation. In order to avoid this unfortunate situation while attempting to identify a group of concepts, essentially contested concepts, concerning which the disagreement can be said to be genuine in its most rudimentary sense i.e. it must most minimally be about the same object matter, Gallie needs to distinguish the confused uses of concepts from "unconfused".

Gallie. According to their narrower reading “the link to the original exemplar plays a crucial role in allowing analysts to distinguish between essentially contested concepts and confused concepts” (ibid. 219). Basically, when the same term refers to two different ideas one is dealing with a confused concept. But in the case of an essentially contested concept, the concept is derived from the (singular) original exemplar, so there is no confusion about the concept but rather contestation over its correct characterization. The original exemplar, thus, anchors conceptual meaning and disputants can rest assured their contestation is over the same concept.

The broader reading⁴¹ of Gallie’s original exemplar can be inferred from the sections where he notes that the nature of the example set by the original exemplar is “internally complex and variously describable” and therefore “it is natural that different features in it should be differently weighted by different appraisers”. Gallie follows “that recognition or acceptance of the exemplar’s achievement must have that “open” character which we have ascribed to every essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1956a: 176–7). When covering the concept of democracy as an example of an essentially contested concept Gallie states that “these [aggressive and defensive] uses claim the authority of an exemplar, i.e., of a long tradition of demands, aspirations, revolts and reforms of a common *anti-inegalitarian* character”. Gallie claims that the “vagueness of tradition in no way affects its influence as an exemplar” mentioning the French Revolution as an influence for various political movements. (ibid. 186.) This kind of broader reading seems to be intuitively appealing. It makes sense to assume a past-dependency in conceptual use in a form of significant events and subsequent traditions. Gallie is right to insist that the vagueness of tradition confronted while trying to pinpoint and reflect the exact way the said tradition directs ours conceptual usage in no way affects its concrete influence on people. It just might be that the relevant considerations are so complex (and of plural nature) that the situation is despairingly hard to simplify as a clear set of principles. But,

⁴¹ Here I differ slightly but importantly from the reading given by Collier, Hidalgo and Marcieanu (Collier et al. 2006: 219–20). In his original article Gallie discusses his initial artificial example (of bowling championship) in a relation to the need for the original exemplar. Gallie notes: “This exemplar’s way of playing must be recognized by all the contesting teams (and their supporters) to be “the way the game is to be played”; yet, because of the internally complex and variously describable character of the exemplar’s play, it is natural that different features in it should be differently weighted by different appraisers...” The original exemplar’s *play*, not the original exemplar itself, is “internally complex and variously describable. Unfortunately, this imprecise definition is repeated couple of times afterwards reducing the number of possible interpretations of Gallie’s position oversimplifying it.

that would practically mean that the notion of exemplar has no clear value as a notion which can give us further insight⁴².

Before tackling with the criticism directed against the sixth condition further clarification of Gallie's terminology is in order. According to conditions (I) to (IV) an essentially contested concept must signify a valued achievement and be internally complex, variously describable and open in character. However, Gallie uses the same terminology to describe "exemplar's achievement". If Gallie proposes that the disputants who use essentially contested concept use the same concept because they value the achievement of the exemplar which is the same achievement the concept itself signifies, Gallie is basically saying that the disputants use the same concept because they happen to value the same "achievement" at the same time they (coincidentally) use the same term. According to this interpretation, the real role of the exemplar is seen as a sort of label which helps the participants to fathom which "achievement" i.e. valuation the other is referring to. If this is what Gallie is saying he surely isn't saying much. Luckily there are some other alternatives to consider.

The narrow interpretation of the original exemplar, on the other hand, comes with a considerable baggage. It's hard to even make sense of the situation in which the authority of original exemplar is acknowledged "by all the contestant users of the concept". It looks like there are quite a few possibilities to interpret this. 1) There exists a group of "cardinal" concepts whose basic unchangeable meaning or import can be discerned or appreciated in the light of changing circumstances, but as fixed concepts, they themselves remain unchangeable by definition. Such a concept would be a wondrous thing indeed, and even more so, when considering that the "achievement" or normative substance the concept signifies must be open by nature⁴³. 2) The authority of exemplar is of such kind that the participants in the dispute acknowledge the terminology used by the said exemplar in a

⁴² I actually don't think that this is the case. Certain sort of conception of exemplar can have heuristic value for us in explaining the way we tend to argue for certain conceptions and we can certainly refer to some conception of a concept as providing pragmatic results deemed advantageous by us when accepted locally or universally. What is meant in the present context of the text above is that, due to possible complexity of the wider interpretation of the exemplar as a tradition whose content may be impossible to define precisely as a clear set of principles, straightforward conclusions cannot be drawn in a sense that a certain interpretation made within a tradition is a direct result of applying standards found within said tradition in a self-evident way.

⁴³ In this case Ernest Gellner's (1967) comment about Gallie "betraying his own idea" would hit the mark spot on. Michael Stokes remarks that "the requirement of an exemplar enables a defense against the charge of Platonism" but that "it is not clear that the notion of an exemplar offers a complete defence to the charge of Platonism because it may be that without some intuitive understanding of an ideal type, we would not be able to identify the important features of the exemplar" (Stokes 2007: 690 fn.22).

manner that they see no reason to diverge from it. In this scenario their project of improving exemplar's achievement would take rather a strict operational form. After the linguistic turn of mid-20th century, a project of this kind does not seem sensible. Besides, it would fit rather unwell with the view held by Gallie himself that the nature of socio-political concepts in general is open. 3) The significance of the exemplar's theory is groundbreaking in a sense that "after it, nothing remains the same". The situation would then be pretty similar to Kuhnian paradigm shift. Although paradigm shifts arguably happen in social sciences as well as in natural sciences, this is not the kind of general phenomenon Gallie clearly had in mind when he introduced the idea of essentially contested concepts.

Gallie begins his article "Essentially Contested Concepts" by comparing the difference between natural and social sciences: "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" (Gallie 1956a: 167). Freedman, however, has clearly this kind of picture in mind when 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" (Freedman 1996: 60).

What, then, becomes of the broader interpretation of the exemplar's role associated with essentially contested concepts? Setting aside the obscurity of Gallie's terminology mentioned above, many commentators have expressed their concern over the likelihood of acknowledgment of exemplar's authority. MacIntyre (1973) argues that "we do not know how to decide whether a given alleged instance of a phenomenon is to be treated as a counter-example to a proposed generalization or as not an example of the phenomenon at all, because debate remains open about which the central, standard, and paradigmatic instances of the phenomenon are" (MacIntyre 1973: 2-3).

Regarding 'power' as an essentially contested concept Steven Lukes (1977), however, argues that there are "standard cases of the possession and exercise of power about which all will agree". These instances constitute the concept's common core. The following disputes concern "where and how far the boundaries of the concept are to be extended" (Lukes 1977: 418.) His view is clearly parallel to narrower interpretation presented above. In my opinion, it seems pretty reasonable to claim that at least some

paradigmatic examples of historical situations or practices where the implementation of power is evident are to be found and widely agreed as such. Nonetheless it would be rather odd to argue that the correct definition of the concept could be “deducted” from those instances as constituting the common core of a concept. Luckily, Gallie is not proposing such a move. The sole purpose of the original exemplar is to show that the “subject matter” (however obscure) of the disputes involving the essentially contested concepts is agreed by all parties explicitly or implicitly. Since the nature of the dispute is ‘essential’ simple deduction from paradigmatic instances is not possible, although disputants can try to affect the outcome of the dispute by invoking the “correct deduction” rhetorically with the use of practical reasoning. In this sense, the paradigmatic examples do anchor the concept, or at the very least, the dispute about the concept. The occurring disputes over “where and how far the boundaries of the concept are to be extended” are, then, to be seen as articulations contesting the criteria of the concept.

John Gray (1978) acknowledges the importance of the conditions (I) to (V) but criticizes condition (VI) for failing “to distinguish logically between the present functioning of a concept and its history”. He concedes that Gallie’s account might be interpreted as an attempt to illuminate the social and cultural sources and the historical nature of the contest without suggesting that a historical investigation can actually resolve the dispute. Nonetheless, Gray claims Gallie to be “mistaken in supposing that an agreed exemplar is always, or even typically, present in disputes of this kind”. Referring to the work done by Quine and Putnam⁴⁴ Gray also argues that by supposing some common and at least theoretically definable core (exemplar) to essentially contested concepts Gallie’s “critique of some aspects of analytical empiricism and linguistic philosophy... exemplifies some of the characteristic errors of these schools” (Gray 1978: 389–390.)

I take it that Gray’s criticism is directed against the “narrow” interpretation of the original exemplar proposed by Lukes, for example. He rightly points out that a concept like ‘democracy’ differs from a concept like ‘politics’ in a sense that while it is somewhat plausible to speak about common characteristics of ‘democracy’, the criteria of such a

⁴⁴ Gray is referring to the notion that analytic-synthetic distinction breaks down when confronted with the concepts consisting of multiple and variable criteria. In this he follows William Connolly (1993). Since the definition of the cluster concept is composed of several criteria which are not always at the same time present in a situation in which the concept is applied the conceptual connection between the criteria of the concept and the concept itself is not automatically purely analytic (or synthetic for that matter) connection. “To apply such an argument to these concepts is to force them into molds imposed by the requirements of a false dichotomy” (Connolly 1993: 17–22). For another perspective see Jeremy Waldron’s (2002) criticism that one should *not* “associate essential contestability with a comprehensive skepticism about the analytic/synthetic distinction” (ibid. 152; also fn. 38).

concept as ‘politics’ “have neither a purely analytic nor a purely synthetic relationship to that concept” (Gray 1978: 390). To claim that there is some kind of original exemplar present when various disputants contest over the meaning of ‘politics’ sounds highly doubtful. According to the conventional hermeneutical thinking a user of a concept and its interpreter must share at least some aspects of a concept for a sensible interpretation to be possible at all. Gallie’s exemplar seems to serve a similar function for distinguishing radically confused concepts from essentially contested concepts. For to be sure that various contending uses of a concept actually refer to the same concept there must be something, which roughly anchors conceptual meaning, shared. It is only natural that—since the meanings of the socio-political concepts clearly change over time—Gallie looks back to history to find some kind of Archimedean point, however obscure and theoretical, to secure the “drifting” concepts.

Gray’s argument is highly plausible when directed against the narrow interpretation of the original exemplar but loses its edge when confronted with the broader interpretation⁴⁵. If one acknowledges that there are no paradigmatic examples of the concept as some kind of “historical entity” or everlasting platonic idea, there is still room to maneuver around the notion of original exemplar. It is well worth noting that there must be some common ground shared by the disputants but there are clearly other possibilities besides a singular common core of a concept illustrated by an original exemplar. Once again, one must focus one’s attention on the nature of the dispute itself. When confronted with philosophical logical rigor the notion of some common concepts and ideas that shift their meaning over time is implausible or even absurd. Yet, we talk about the concepts and use them *as if* they could possess such characteristics. This simple observation complicates and adds another level to the discussion concerning the essentially contested concepts and more generally points to the intersubjective formulation of meanings.

Let’s consider a case in which the valued achievements of the original exemplar are many. For example, the original exemplar A is valued because of its achievements A (1), A (2) and A (3). Now suppose that the participants of the later dispute, P (1), P (2) and P (3), rank the order of the achievements of the exemplar (A (1), A (2) and A (3)) differently but still hold that the original exemplar is worthy of admiration because of its

⁴⁵ “Admittedly, it might be agreed that no necessary fallacy exists in Gallie’s account, in that appealing to a shared historical exemplar so as to illuminate the social and cultural sources and history of the contest need not be to suggest that such an historical investigation can in any way resolve the dispute, but it still appears that Gallie is mistaken in supposing that an agreed exemplar is always, or even typically, present in disputes of this kind” (Gray 1978: 390).

overall achievement A (1,2,3). In this case, let's say that the overall achievement is, in fact, the reason why the exemplar is considered as the original exemplar. It may be that the disputant P (1) valuing the "partial" achievement A (1) of the original exemplar develops the notion further even to the point surpassing "the original partial achievement of the original exemplar". Does this mean that the participant P (1) is now considered as the original exemplar of the participants P (2) and P (3)? No, the participants P (2) and P (3) consider the partial achievement, A (2) and A (3), of the original exemplar A as more valuable and worthy of their admiration and future attempts to develop. They still consider the partial achievement A (1) to be an important factor in the overall achievement of the original exemplar but perhaps there are serious difficulties to fit the changes proposed by the participant B to the overall framework or the theory of the original exemplar. It might be that the changes in original criteria (or altogether new set of criteria) are too severe causing the diminishment of the partial achievements A (2) and A (3). P (1) doesn't see this as a problem since she valued other aspect of the overall achievement more.

Taking the abstract example⁴⁶ further there is a couple of things yet to consider. What if P (2) and P (3) see the notion proposed by P (1) as a clean breakthrough? Without diminishing the importance of the partial achievements A (2) and A (3), P (1) has without a question enhanced the overall achievement of the original exemplar. In this case, the overall achievement of P (1) is surely a new standard to be considered in the future. P (1)—the notion or the theory proposed, to be exact—becomes, in fact, the new exemplar. The achievement of the previous exemplar A can still be considered as a milestone on a field

⁴⁶ Not wanting to confuse this example with Gallie's "artificial example" I have dubbed it as an "abstract example".

(of research). Undoubtedly, A has influenced P (1) greatly. Nonetheless, the king is dead, long live the new king⁴⁷!

The situation becomes trickier when both P (1) and P (2), for example, are considered as to have developed the preferred partial achievement further. For the sake of argument, let's stipulate that while they both have surpassed the partial achievement of the original exemplar A there are severe difficulties in combining the benefits of each position. Neither P (1) nor P (2) see it possible—at least for the time being—to make substantial alterations to their views without diminishing the overall achievement. Perhaps the participant P (3) has his own alternative as well. What can we make of the situation? To be sure, neither P (1) nor P (2) is undisputedly considered as the new exemplar. All parties still consider the A as the “real” exemplar even though they see their own notion as the most advanced of all the available positions right now.

The situation in which a new “player” on a field, P (4), would throw his unequivocal support for the P (2) considering P (2) as the new original exemplar “to be followed” complicates the matter further. In the abstract terms of the example the P (4) would be transformed into P (3) (given that their views are practically identical) or, perhaps, P (3)* (given that the P (4) believes strongly that P (3) is the new original exemplar). There is also a possibility that all or some of the participants “discover” that, actually, the achievement of A is not worthy at all. Thus, A ceases to be the exemplar in any real sense. But before I run out of alphabets and asterisks, let's just say that the possible scenarios are numerous. It's time to flesh out the abstract example presented.

One can replace the “unknowns” of the abstract example above by real world instances. Since it would mean to unnecessarily complicate the matter further I'm not

⁴⁷ Mark Criley notes that “...Gallie's inclusion of this condition [VI] bars what seems to me to be a salient characteristic of contested concepts: that even when there are cases that are understood as central or canonical exemplars on which a community broadly agrees, later conceptual inquiry can sometimes lead a community to retract as mistaken their judgment that those cases were instance to which the concept applies” (Criley 2007: 29, brackets added). I tend to agree with Criley's assessment in relation to Gallie's original thesis although Gallie could perhaps point out that since the original exemplar directs the various conceptions of it in such a forceful way we would have to surmise that the concept behind a given use of a term has actually changed despite the fact that the term has remained unchanged when the “canonical exemplar” broadly agreed upon earlier is now deemed as mistaken and replaced by another. Some examples to which the concept in question is deemed as applicable to are almost certain to change (in the light of changing circumstances in the future) but the point behind ‘original exemplar’ exemplifying certain “basic interpretation” (nearing almost axiomatic status, though a curious one, to its followers) of some concept is its uncanny capacity to admit a variety of descriptions that are held in the spirit of the original exemplar's achievement. The historical instances can be seen as manifesting these ideal-types (they are constructed as such) in a convincing way. For example, the French Revolution might stand *for some* as a historical instance that has manifested “what the ‘revolution’ is all about”. Were these people to change their minds—i.e. the concept of revolution does not apply at all to the French Revolution—it could be argued that they now employ a different concept (although they may not be aware of it since they are confused about the term).

going to do that in a strict sense. However, we only have to scratch the surface of the liberal thought and tradition to find (ideological) disputes that can arguably be said to follow the pattern of the illustration above—naturally this holds true for any such tradition of thought. Pick any classical thinker of liberal tradition (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Mill etc.) and “give” him a position of the exemplar. One is sure to find much admiration for the *achievement* of the thinker and his theory. This should not be confused with simply elevating one figure above others on the pedestal. Instead, I’m talking about following a tradition of thought to such an extent that the basic nature of the notion proposed “pays homage” to said tradition and follows its terminology or vocabulary. These are just some “external” clues for us to find and, if we want, to analyze, not sufficient conditions or *sine qua non*. It is no coincidence that John Rawls, to take one example, states that his original position presented in *Theory of Justice* “carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, say in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant” (Rawls 1971: 10). It is easy enough to see even without his admission what the exemplars he follows are. Some other theorists—the prime example here being Nozick of course—can follow the same “baseline” tradition by making their own interpretations of the set of criteria employed originally by the exemplar(s)⁴⁸. Since the achievement of the original exemplar is multi-faceted and the criteria employed by the exemplar can be appraised differently, it is no wonder that the interpretations (of the conception of ‘freedom’ in relation to ‘justice’) vary. There’s nothing deeply problematic here. The state of affairs is, nonetheless, frustratingly complex when actual empirical cases are considered. It is unrealistic to assume that traditions are straightforward signposts with the help of which to navigate through the dark forest of various other traditions. When one comes out of the woods it is nowhere near as clear that he possesses a conceptual arsenal that can be unambiguously traced to a certain tradition, or, that he has not picked up bits and pieces from other traditions, thus possibly “compromising” the coherency of his conceptual apparatus.

As is the case with all formal abstractions, the oversimplified form of the theory presenting us a picture of workings of the social reality leads us easily astray. Gallie’s theory is easily grasped, at first, since its formal structure is rather straightforward. However, due to its “economic” use of the terminology it is in a dire need of fleshing out.

⁴⁸ David-Hillel Ruben (2010) argues that the scope of application of Gallie’s original theory should be limited to the assessment of ‘true succession’ within a certain tradition. According to him what is really essentially contested is the determination of who is the true successor of the original exemplar. ‘True successor’ would then be more exact and explanatory term for what Gallie referred to as ‘champion’ in his artificial example.

The theory presented in “Essentially Contested Concepts” implicates that the achievement of the exemplar is “simple” and the criteria of the concept are various transforming the concept as complex. It is rather odd that, even if Gallie realizes the possibility of appraising the criteria differently, he seems to think the achievement of the exemplar is appraised equally by the participants of the dispute. One could equate these two things and state that they flow from the same fundamental interpretation process of an individual—and they very well might—but when given a concise theoretical form it only confuses the issue and begs the question of what kind of interpretation process is behind the evaluation of concepts.

2.6 Condition VII: Progressive competition

So far I have shown that Gallie’s notion of essentially contested concepts is by no means without complications. The condition (VII) is perhaps the most controversial of them all. I already mentioned in section 2.4 that Gallie takes a consequence of the reciprocal recognition “to be a marked raising of the level of quality of arguments in the disputes of the contestant parties” (Gallie 1956a: 193). To distinguish essentially contested concepts from radically confused concepts requires the condition (VI), the original exemplar, but also condition (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” (ibid. 180). Gallie’s choice of words here is infuriating to be honest. Given the complexities involved in explicating the exact role of the original exemplar it is far from clear what Gallie means by sustainability and/or development of “the original exemplar’s achievement” in optimum fashion.

While discussing the artificial example of bowling championship⁴⁹ Gallie asserts that concerning the conditions (II) to (IV) “we must admit the following possibility: that this achievement could not have been revived and sustained or developed to the optimum which actual circumstances have allowed, except by the kind of continuous competition for acknowledged championship (and for acceptance of one particular criterion of “championship”) which my artificial example was designed to illustrate” (ibid. 178). At first, it might appear that Gallie has in mind something like a competition between

⁴⁹ See section 2.3, fn. 31.

scientific hypotheses but he draws a clear distinction here: “nothing remotely like this is true in the case of essentially contested concepts; none of these, in the nature of the case, ever succumbs—as most scientific theories eventually do—to a definite or judicial knock-out” (ibid. 178–9). Unlike in social sciences, in natural sciences there are acknowledged general methods or principles for deciding between rival hypotheses.

Gallie’s artificial example is somewhat misleading since the winning of the “championship” in a bowling game seems to require a set of rules Gallie is claiming social sciences not having. It should be remembered that the championship Gallie is discussing is awarded rather peculiarly since “the spectators” dub the team they *think* to play the game best as champions. The whole matter of championship is based on appraisive criteria held in respect by the spectators. Therefore “it is quite impossible to find a *general principle* for deciding which of two contestant uses of an essentially contested concept really ‘uses it best’” (ibid. 189). The lack of a general principle for a definite knock-out *guarantees* the essentially contestable nature of the dispute. As I argued above⁵⁰ the spirit of Gallie’s notion is not at odds with the possibility of practical and temporal closures of the disputes. With the introduction of the condition (VII) this is clearly so.

The game metaphor of the artificial example illustrated by Gallie raises a few questions though. If the championship is awarded based solely on the “aesthetical nature” of the play, why do the teams play at all or why do they follow the rules of the play? I’m not talking about the supposed rules or general principles for deciding which team’s performance is the best or “the most aesthetic” but the rules of conduct so to speak. Why do the participants of supposedly endless disputes want to engage the discussion at all? Could it be that some disputants would resort to violent means to achieve their goals when they realize that the ongoing dispute is not only frustrating and difficult but *in principle* without a possible resolution? This observation would not be an objection against Gallie’s theory if he would not assume that as a consequence of reciprocal recognition of the open character of essentially contested concepts is “a marked raising of the level of quality of arguments in the disputes of the contestant parties” which, in effect, would develop and/or sustain “the original exemplar’s achievement in optimum fashion”. Especially since Gallie seems to concern himself only with the concepts that have a positive normative valence, his overall theory embraces a rather substantial ethical view. Some theorists have accused Gallie of committing himself to an undesirable moral relativism. I’m inclined to think

⁵⁰ See section 2.3, fn. 34.

that's because of an ethical undertone of Gallie's theory—an undertone which is not explicitly articulated—not because they see the theory advancing moral relativism. If Gallie would argue *for* moral relativism, the criticism of his position as such would be superfluous indeed. Thus, despite “the good intentions” of Gallie, there is room for criticism that the end result is just another type of vicious relativism.

Nonetheless, Gallie realizes the apparent problem. While the best (definite once-and-for-all) use of a concept is unattainable “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” (ibid. 189). Gallie tries to show that there is, or there could be, a rationale behind individual's continued use of the concept to be found. At first he illustrates how supporters of different views can be converted to a cause preferred by an individual in question if faced with convincing arguments. Here Gallie's assertion lacks force because what is challenged is the situation where all parties recognize the essentially contested nature of the concept and realize that there exists only subjectively preferred usages. According to the condition (I) the concept signifies a valued achievement i.e. the concept is appraisive in character. The individual championing a particular view while recognizing the lack of objective standards of evaluation is now in a position where he has to admit that there is no objective basis for his own preferred view which can have a devastating effect on his motive to hold any view at all.

It is also possible, Gallie argues, that the particular performance of a team (or the conception held by a party in dispute) “revives and realizes... some already recognized feature of an already valued style of performance, i.e., that of the original exemplar. Because of this particular performance... [an individual] sees, or claims to see, more clearly and more fully why he has acknowledged and followed the exemplar's style of performance all along... which, given his particular marginal appraisive situation, is conclusive for him, although it is merely impressive or surprising or worth noticing for others” (ibid. 191, brackets added)⁵¹.

However, Gallie recognizes the apparent lack of his assurances. There exists a possibility that once contestant users of any essentially contested concept stop to “...believe, however deludedly, that their own use of it is the only one that can command

⁵¹ Actually, Gallie is on the right track when noting that there is a fundamental difference between an individual's “particular marginal appraisive situation” from which reasons to hold some belief at all are seen conclusive and a third person perspective from which that belief is more or less arbitrary (given the lack of objective standards of evaluation). In section 3.3 I present the notion of transitional rationality in order to secure the meaningfulness of conversion from one view to another.

honest and informed approval ...this harmless if deluded hope may well be replaced by a ruthless decision to cut the cackle, to damn the heretics and to exterminate the unwanted” (ibid. 193–4). This clearly unwanted outcome is “simply a possible causal consequence, such as is in no way logically justifiable, of recognition of a given concept as essentially contested, and has therefore no logical relevance to our present analysis” (ibid. 194). As long as the theory of essentially contested concepts is not pushing forward a certain kind of ethical conception this sort of objection has no logical relevance indeed⁵². But it still may have *some* relevance.

In discussion of the condition (V), recognition, I presented Skinner’s view about the possible reason for disagreement even if the pertinent criteria in question are comprehensively acknowledged. I claimed that the condition of recognition needs an extension to better cover the issue. In the light of the present dilemma, it is easily conceivable that one of the reasons why people do cling to their preferred conceptions while disagreeing about the correct ranking order of the criteria is their purpose to “educate/civilize” other people or “widen/refine their perspective” concerning social awareness. While in many cases this would perhaps accord with submitting oneself to “the chronic human peril of underestimating the value of one’s opponents’ positions” (Gallie 1956a: 193) it certainly gives one motivational reason to keep the contest on⁵³. It is worth noting that in many cases the pertinent criteria are not acknowledged by participants, and the criteria wouldn’t be applied to circumstances in the same way, even if they would be (acknowledged).

There are rather many theorists nowadays who don’t see the overall situation described as a problem, but as a possibility. These academics usually draw their inspiration

⁵² “One very desirable consequence of the required recognition in any proper instance of essential contestedness might therefore be expected to be a marked raising of the level of quality of arguments in the disputes of the contestant parties. And this would mean *prima facie*, a justification of the continued competition for support and acknowledgement between the various contesting parties” (Gallie 1956a: 193). William Connolly seems to agree with Gallie: “Since we often cannot expect knockdown arguments to settle these matters, we must come to terms somehow with the political dimension of such contests. It is possible, and I believe likely, that the politics of these contests would become more enlightened if the contestants realized that in many contexts no single use can be advanced that must be accepted by all reasonable parties. The realization that opposing uses might not be exclusively self-serving but have defensible reasons in their support could introduce into these contests a measure of tolerance and a receptivity to reconsideration of received views” (Connolly 1993: 40–1). However, he assesses these conclusions as disputable: “They flow from the assumption that rationality, fragile as it is, is helped, not hindered, by heightened awareness of the nature and import of our differences” (ibid. 42). Gallie looks to take this assumption for granted.

⁵³ For this reason the condition of reciprocal recognition may need to be augmented by adding a requirement for the recognition of a possibility of conversion in addition to the original condition of recognizing the concept (or an issue in question) as contestable in principle.

from the work of Wittgenstein, and possibly Derrida and Levinas as well. Chantal Mouffe, for example, points out that:

“...the aim of democratic politics is to construct the ‘them’ in such a way it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary’, that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question. An adversary is an enemy, but a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have shared adhesion to ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality. But we disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of those principles, and such a disagreement is not one that could be resolved through deliberation and rational discussion. Indeed, given the ineradicable pluralism of value, there is no rational resolution of the conflict, hence its antagonistic dimension... To accept the view of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of *conversion* than a process of rational persuasion...” (Mouffe 2000: 101–2).

The resemblance to Gallie’s views is uncanny—although it must be noted that Gallie does not ground his views on “ineradicable pluralism of value”, at least explicitly. It seems to me that the sort of ‘conversion’ Mouffe speaks of is nearly identical to Gallie’s view about “changing teams”. In the same vein, both are of the opinion that *rational* persuasion (as a rigid demonstration) is not strictly speaking possible since contesting parties value various criteria (“meaning and implementation” in the quote) differently. The common ground needed to have a meaningful discussion, or contestation for that matter, at all is shared liberal culture which approximates status of exemplar in Gallie’s terminology. Jürgen Habermas offers us a further insight in his discussion of the benefits of genuine dialogue between secularists and those subscribing to religious beliefs:

“If both sides agree to understand the secularization of society as a complementary learning process, then they will also have cognitive reasons to take seriously each other’s contributions to controversial subjects in the public debate... The understanding of tolerance in pluralistic societies with a liberal constitution demands that in their dealings with unbelievers and those of different faiths, believers should grasp that they must reasonably expect that the dissent they encounter will go on existing; at the same time, however, a liberal political culture expects that unbelievers, too, will grasp the same point in their dealings with believers” (Habermas 2006: 47, 50).

Evidently, Gallie sees the progressive competition as a sort of “complementary learning process” Habermas is referring to; agreeing to understand it as such a process ties conditions (V) and (VII) neatly together. In the passage above Habermas points out that

this might be enough to give sufficient cognitive reasons to hold diverging, even essentially so⁵⁴, views and still take other party's contribution seriously. Nonetheless, if the contestants do not see "the big picture" as a complementary learning process, and "that their own use of it is the only one that can command honest and informed approval..." (Gallie 1956a: 193) they may very well turn to violent means. Considering the fact that such violence over the matters of principle seem to take place around the world every day, these kinds of scenarios are likely in the future as well. However, the real reason behind such actions isn't probably frustration with the essentially contestable status of one's own position, quite the contrary.

Even if the quotes from Mouffe and Habermas lend support to Gallie's theory another possibility emerges. Phrases like "the aim of democratic politics" and "shared adhesion to ethico-political principles of liberal democracy" or "the understanding of tolerance in pluralistic societies with a liberal constitution" give a room for thought that the theory of essentially contested concepts is substantially tied to the liberal political culture and its ethical and moral demands and/or vital conditions⁵⁵. If that is so, the essentiality of essentially contested concepts dwindles fast. Thus, Gallie's theory can be characterized in terms not unlike the one Habermas is proposing with "the ideal speech situation" i.e. it is a substantially liberal conception, not a general one. Of course, Gallie doesn't characterize the situation in terms used by Mouffe and Habermas and the condition (IV), the open character of a concept, gives him some room for maneuver. Yet, if the conditions (V) and (VII) limit possible future interpretations and uses of concepts significantly (in this case advancing a substantially liberal interpretation of them), the overall theory is open to serious criticism. Moreover, then, it could be said that the theory of essentially contested concepts advances at least a partial ethical view. How a severe flaw is this depends on a person doing the criticizing⁵⁶.

Gallie can answer these objections by saying that it is precisely the progressive competition which has led us to this point in history i.e. the conventions, practices and concepts now established are the results of progressive competition rendering them

⁵⁴ By this I do not mean to imply that Habermas is a supporter of essential contestability thesis as such.

⁵⁵ Paraphrasing Reinhardt Koselleck one could say that a certain understanding of the nature of the concepts in question is a "by-product" of culture or history (see e.g. Koselleck 2002).

⁵⁶ For instance, it might be contended that every notion of 'progressive development' requires committing oneself to one or another ethical outlook in order to identify progressiveness at all. From a third person perspective this appears to be true, but I assume one could make a case for progress seen as transitional matter i.e. the future generations define the degree of progress solely by their own standards. In a sense, that must always be so since the mortality of man guarantees that, after sufficient time, no direct dialogue with one's forefathers is possible.

superior to other alternative conventions, practices and concepts. However, this is a rather implausible explanation—and possibly not being able to give us any further insight into the matter—one that presupposes a particular sort of progression of human history as a necessarily self-correcting enterprise. As it happens, we might have taken “the wrong turn” at some point. He can also claim that while the conditions outlined in his theory seem to favor certain kind of progression there has never been, or is, any certainty that the progression develops the certain understanding of conceptual disputes; even more so if other factors affecting cultural movements and shifts are taken into account. This is, however, a rather weak position.

There exists a stronger variant of the latter position. What if it is the human condition that has driven us to this point? Naturally, without defining the characteristics of the human condition the phrase is tautological. For the present purpose it is sufficient to raise a possibility of the kind of explanation needed. A fully-fledged theoretical conception could be similar to Hegel’s master/slave- dichotomy. When the people would be aware of their particular condition as humans, it could give them cognitive reasons to shape their social reality accordingly. For example, if it would be generally acknowledged that the recognition by others is one of the most significant factors affecting the development of an individual to become a confident and stable person we would be surely motivated to shape the social conditions accordingly. This leaves a door open to empirical research in social sciences, and most especially in psychology, as well. The scientific advancements in the empirical research could function as reason-giving force on a level of individual awareness i.e. as cognitive reasons⁵⁷. Yet, the progression can be more or less contingent depending on other factors affecting it⁵⁸.

Some researchers gather that the purpose of Gallie’s condition (VII) is to ensure an avenue for progressive conceptual clarification since to embrace the notion of essentially contested concepts would be to succumb oneself to endless conceptual debates.

⁵⁷ I leave the nature of this process undefined as it goes a way beyond the scope of my research.

⁵⁸ Several affecting factors are conceivable. For example, there could be natural disasters impairing the progression. Also, if the basic social conditions of the world would change fundamentally (e.g. unlimited material resources for everyone were to be available) it could starkly affect the way we see ourselves as social beings. It is also somewhat feasible that even the basic human condition could change as the humankind advances technologically. What was science fiction a hundred years ago is now a part of everyday life. The fundamental change of the basic human condition is not, however, something that can be taken reliably into account when theorizing about human understanding since it would effectively change the whole framework of understanding and how we see ourselves as humans (or as something else). One has to do with the material at hand. For an account how the recent developments in biotechnology and genetic research could affect the identity and self-understanding of the species, see for example *The Future of Human Nature* (Habermas 2003).

Ian Shapiro (1989) sees the conceptual clarification possible but not within the limits of Gallie's framework. What is needed, however, is to broaden the perspective from political philosophy and political theory to include a wider array of interdisciplinary (social) sciences. 'Gross concepts', as Shapiro calls social concepts, deal with substantive empirical issues that cannot be reduced to rigorous meanings of concepts⁵⁹. Political theory, he argues, "is also irreducibly descriptive because it is about a concrete set of particulars—the changing relations of scarcity, power, and finitude that set the terms of human social interaction". Substantive disagreements about the terms used in a relational argument are often reduced to "disagreements about the meanings of the terms themselves, making a self-fulfilling prophecy out of the 'essential contestability' thesis". Shapiro considers plausible the claim that there are at least *some* essentially contested concepts but not all disagreements between protagonists are contestations over correct *meanings* of normative concepts (of politics). "Defenders of the essential contestability thesis leap much too rapidly from surface disagreements to their conclusion". (Shapiro 1989: 67–8.)

According to my reading of Gallie it would be a mistake to interpret the thesis of essential contestability as an attempt to clarify the meanings of concepts themselves. In the beginning of "Essentially Contested Concepts" Gallie states that while he doesn't want to advocate a return to "the idea of philosophy as kind of "engine" of thought, that can be laid on to eliminate conceptual confusions wherever they may rise" he hopes to show that his method of approach "can give us enlightenment of a much needed kind" (Gallie 1956a: 168.) In the end of the article, however, he asserts that "...clarification or improved understanding of a concept would naturally be taken to mean improvement in one's skill and confidence in using it—thanks to, e.g., a full and clear statement of the rules governing its use. But quite clearly this account will not serve for all concepts, and in particular, not for appraisive concepts" (ibid. 197). It is no wonder that many academic researchers have taken Gallie's views rather personally since it seems that the very possibility of conducting a research in a field of social sciences is threatened. As it is, on many occasions, the focus has been on the possibility of achieving closure, temporal or definite. The condition (VII) has been interpreted from that basis.

Despite the considerations given for or against the plausibility of condition (VII) above Gallie's intention was to concentrate on the original exemplar's achievement which is sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion due to the continuous competition for

⁵⁹ A closer look on Shapiro's account is taken in section 2.8.

acknowledgment of the particular use of the concept. For example, if we consider women's suffrage to be a valued achievement the following contestation over the correct understanding of the gender equality can be seen as an attempt to develop the original achievement in optimum fashion. If we interpret condition (VI) broadly, the tradition that was exemplarily initiated by the suffragettes in the beginning of the century is now continued by the feminist movement for which the suffragettes serve as the original exemplar. This is a commonsense interpretation of the original exemplar, but not one without problems since—by being just an example of one possible particular case—it does not give us sufficient conceptual tools for identifying other such cases or, moreover, help us in any concrete way in really difficult cases in which the disputants at least seemingly do not share common exemplar. If, on the other hand, we could find a way to identify the original exemplar, or another conception serving the same purpose, the case for progressive competition of exemplar's achievement could be resolved, or at least reframed, in a meaningful way⁶⁰.

Freeden raises also a possibility that “it is quite conceivable that such a concept may be impoverished during competition over its interpretation... or that the level of debate may be of low quality” (Freeden 1996: 60). Some aspects of the meaning of the concept may be lost or abandoned, that is true, but since the essentially contested concepts are supposedly open in character, that would be something to be expected, not lamented. Unfortunately Freeden leaves it open what ‘impoverishment’ of a concept would actually entail. One can certainly say that the current usage of any single essentially contested concept is somehow “impoverished” when compared to its previous usage but to do so would be to actually participate in the process of contestation of that concept. To assume a standard against which the concept is deemed “impoverished” is, in practice, to assume some sort of original exemplar Freeden most emphatically denies as “inimical to the very

⁶⁰ In these “really difficult cases” the strategy of reframing the contours of a given dispute in terms of disputants being part of some other, more general, tradition of thought which requires (in non-coercive sense) disputants to acknowledge other considerations not previously taken into account in the original dispute can help to “air” the debate stuck in a rut. But because the opinions are formed from one's subjective perspective and held respectively it does not seem likely that one could force someone to accept the authority of some other exemplar as overriding in virtue of supposed membership to that tradition.

notion of essential contestability” (ibid.)⁶¹. Gallie, on the other hand, can sincerely try to make a case for the progressive competition since he has the standard of evaluation embodied in the form of original exemplar. Is the condition (VII) now saved? No. What is shown here clearly is that—other previously mentioned difficulties aside—it stands or falls with the condition (VI). Without the original exemplar it’s well nigh impossible to make a case for progressive competition in Gallie’s framework.

Jeremy Waldron (2002) proposes that since one does not need to assume disputants’ awareness of their use of an essentially contested concept, the beneficial results considering the increased understanding about the nature of the issue contested can occur even if the disputants themselves would continue to vehemently contest other uses of the concept. Discussing the interpretation of the ‘Rule of Law’ in the case of the aftermath of presidential elections (Bush vs. Gore) in which the Supreme Court of the United States take much disputed and controversial stance regarding the counting of votes in the state of Florida, Waldron concludes that the dispute (potentially) helped to increase understanding of what is at stake in the disputes of this kind although it contributed to—at least to some degree—a loss of trust to the institution of the law and court—a sign in itself that understanding had increased. This didn’t require a prior characterization of the concept as essentially contested on the part of its users and it can be argued that particular viewpoints were presented within a legal tradition of Rule of Law dating back to Aristoteles. (Waldron 2002.) Still, this increased understanding in itself must be seen as superior to “old understanding” that prevailed before the incident in which ‘Rule of Law’ was essentially contested without contestants being aware of the nature of their dispute. And this requires an external standard of evaluation or a conception of rationality that can plausibly explain that the understanding has been actually increased in a given (individual or collective) case.

⁶¹ There is another alternative for seeing how essential contestability might lead to impoverishment of a concept. It is plausible that a concept used by virtually everyone may undergo a process of *semantic bleaching* i.e. the concept loses its original criteria of application rendering it pretty much pointless because it is now indiscriminately employed in everyday usage. As example one could mention the adjective form ‘rational’ which has become a concept of affirmation or denouncement without any clear reference to a specific conception of rationality other than its utterer’s own. In contemporary Finland the concept of racism (fin. “rasismi”) is undergoing—if it hasn’t already gone through—a change one might identify as semantic bleaching since the concept seems to be losing its original moorings to ‘race’ with expressions such as “age racism” (“ikärasismi”) growing more frequent every day. It must be noted that “racism” has maintained a sense of negative valuation but this seems to be typical to these kind of cases, in general. Summa summarum, one could perhaps argue that tendency to relativize the terminology of language (especially since the terms are used aggressively and defensively) might lead, in the end, to the impoverishment of that terminology in the specified sense.

2.7 Undesirable relativism?

After the discussion of the seven basic conditions of ‘essentially contested concepts’ I have to conclude that Gallie is unable to identify an attribute or characteristic of a concept (“causing” essential contestability) needed to claim that the nature of certain kind of concepts—certain characteristics of them—guarantees the pervasiveness and endlessness of the disputes in any meaningful sense of the prefix “essential”. However, that does not necessarily mean that no such thing could be found. In this section I evaluate the claims that, even if some attribute rendering the concepts ‘essentially contestable’ could be found, it would lead only to conceptual relativism that would not admit superiority of one conception over another. That would, in turn, have a serious effect on the central notion of Gallie—illustrated by the artificial example of rooting for one team and not for another—that definitional disputes about the criteria of application are meaningful, even fruitful, to have—as illustrated by the condition of progressive competition. First, I consider the remarks made by Barry Clarke after which I focus on the considerations given by John Gray⁶².

To begin with, Barry Clarke delineates the issue at hand concisely:

“(T)he identification of an essentially contested concept requires some principle by which it can be shown that a genuine case of polysemy is at issue rather than an uninteresting case of homonymy... such a principle could locate the source of the dispute either within the concept itself or in some underlying non-conceptual disagreement between the contestants. In the latter case the conceptual contest would be an outcome rather than a source of dispute” (Clarke 1979: 123).

If it is to be shown that a thesis of essential contestability locating the source of essential contestability within the concepts leads to undesirable relativism, the theoretical framework that focuses on the issue solely on the level of concepts should perhaps be

⁶² It must be noted that both Clarke and Gray comment a theoretical dispute between K.I.MacDonald and Steven Lukes regarding the conception of ‘power’ advocated by Lukes. Their contributions are also relevant for the present purpose since they discuss the issue of relativism in relation to a notion of essential contestability in general terms.

discarded⁶³. This would require one wanting to understand the actual phenomenon to construct a better framework with which to work with. I find Clarke's assessment, that there are two central philosophical positions distinguishable, a 'linguistic autonomy' and a view that 'language is socially determined', in attempts to find the source of essential contestability, to be highly plausible (ibid. 124)⁶⁴. Between these two approaches "(It is clear)", Clarke states "that any claim that a concept is essentially contestable must rest on some version of linguistic autonomy" (ibid.). Indeed, when we consider Gallie's claim that his purpose is "to show that there are apparently endless disputes for which neither of these explanations [psychological or metaphysical] need be the correct one" (Gallie 1956a: 169, brackets added) it seems evident that Gallie purports a view of linguistic autonomy as the better approach. However, as we saw in discussing Gallie's basic conditions, the last two conditions, original exemplar and progressive competition, that should serve for the purpose of distinguishing the essentially contested concepts from the confused concepts, Gallie seems to prefer a point of view of language as socially determined⁶⁵. This tension, I claim, is the primary source for the different interpretations of his position. However, due to the fact that Gallie insists on treating *the concepts* as 'essentially contested', one must emphasize the aspect of linguistic autonomy over the view that language is socially determined when evaluating his theory⁶⁶.

⁶³ There are three main reasons for this: 1) Apparently, Gallie was not trying to produce a theory resting on radical conceptual relativism as is shown by his inclusion of the last two conditions, original exemplar and progressive competition. Although one could perhaps say that, despite Gallie's original intention, he inadvertently stumbled upon an interesting case of conceptual relativism, I personally do not consider that to be the thought provoking insight that can be found in the idea of essential contestability. 2) To insist that there is a group of concepts that are contestable in an essential sense—without providing any clear source of that contestability and at the same time embracing conceptual relativism—would be similar to a position in which one just blatantly denies the attempts to define certain concepts in any meaningful way while maintaining that we can indeed know this particular thing, their essentially contestable nature, about those concepts. That kind of position would be based on a blind belief rather than on an informed point of view and there is reason to believe that it would refute itself. 3) Although I have used the terms 'dispute', 'contest' and 'conflict' as practically interchangeable during my study, there is no point in saying that something is "contested" while subscribing to radical relativism. This is noted by many commentators, for example, Robert Grafstein states that "radical relativism cannot conceive of a common ground to contest" (Grafstein 1988: 25). John Gray has made this point as well. If there is nothing in common between the divergent theories or world-views we should not speak about "contests" but of "conflicts" (Gray 1977: 341-2).

⁶⁴ This is an analytical distinction. It is likely that actual theses of essential contestability take a stance combining elements from both sides as is the case with John Gray who advocates a view of essential contestability as "at once conceptual and substantive" (Gray 1978: 391).

⁶⁵ That is, if he wants to avoid the charge conceptual essentialism in the case of original exemplars, as I contend him to do.

⁶⁶ And subsequently, this seems to be the reason for the dispute between K.I. Macdonald and Steven Lukes concerning a possibility of one conception being superior in relation to another. Barry Clarke criticizes not only the views of Lukes but those of Macdonald as well: "Macdonald then is wrong in his claim that the 'proper ground for the contest is the essence of the concept'. On the contrary, the proper ground for such a contest is not the concept at all" (Clarke 1979: 125; for Macdonald's views, see: Macdonald 1976).

Regarding 'power' offered by Steven Lukes to fall into the category of essentially contested concepts by Gallie now interpreted as purporting linguistic autonomy Barry Clarke notes that...

“...if power is held to be essentially contestable no one view of power can be said to be theoretically superior to any other. The claim that a concept is 'essentially contestable' commits the claimant to a radical relativism about essentially contested concepts in general and in this case about the concept of power in particular... Consequently any one idiosyncratic usage of an essentially contestable concept would be as valid as any alternative idiosyncratic usage.” (Clarke 1979: 125).

Thus, Clarke asserts that essential contestability would commit the claimant to a radical relativism, even if some attribute causing the concept to be essential contestable could be identified within a concept itself, the feat nobody has been able to do, as far as I know. This seems to be true as far as one discusses the issue from the viewpoint of linguistic autonomy. Someone advocating an essential contestability thesis resting on linguistic autonomy could perhaps still claim that even if one particular attribute of a concept renders the concept as essentially contestable *ultimately*, there are other characteristics of it that can be evaluated rationally clearing way for one conception of a concept to be considered superior to another⁶⁷. That would be a weak and implausible position, however, since it seems likely that the characteristics rendering any “real world” example of a concept in relation to some other conception as ‘superior’ do so by virtue of referring to some aspects of social reality rather than keeping at the level of linguistics alone.

Another way to go with the issue would be to give up the identification of a concept as ‘contestable’ i.e. the view point of linguistic autonomy is brushed aside to make way for the notion that the source of essential contestability is socially determined. According to Clarke, this change of the source of essential contestability “protects... from the radical relativism that is a consequence of maintaining a position of essential contestability and allows... to state that there are necessary contests in society and hence that some necessary truths can, at least in principle, be asserted of social and political

⁶⁷ That would imply rather ‘essential incompleteness’ of concepts as the source for our troubles to define these concepts exactly. One subscribing to the notion of incompleteness would have to illustrate what characteristics these type of concepts are lacking by comparing them to “complete concepts”, perhaps. It will not be enough to state that concepts in social sciences are different from those of natural sciences in this regard without identifying “the missing characteristic(s)” in a definitive way. Nonetheless, I assume that this sort of approach could have a fighting chance although it will not be pursued here as it was not the sort of explanation Gallie was after.

contests” (ibid.). After the source of essential contestability is identified as socially determined one has to, still, a conception of rationality that can make sense of the superiority of one conception over another. Otherwise ‘superiority’ would amount to nothing more than “winning a contest” as an empirical statement of (arbitrary) fact that can only be projected *a posteriori*.

Thus, Barry Clarke (1979) concludes that there is no point to talk about the contestable character of certain concepts *unless* we want to advocate a thesis committed to radical relativism regarding these concepts. He also states that such a thesis ends up defeating itself since it is reasonable to assume that the notion of ‘essentially contestable concept’ is itself essentially contestable. Therefore one would do well to “delete all references either to essentially contestable or to essentially contested concepts” (ibid. 126.) In section 2.4 Clarke’s distinction between ‘contested’ and ‘contestable’ was mentioned at the first time.

“To say, however, that a concept is essentially contested rather than contestable is to make a claim of a different kind. For if this view is to be consistent it must rest on some claim that locates all meaning outside the concept itself and in society. If the contest is 'essential' then it is not the concept that is 'essentially contested' but what the concept represents; and this can only be maintained by claiming that some contests are structurally necessary” (Clarke 1979: 124).

Clarke makes a keen observation anyone interested in Gallie’s original theory should heed carefully: what is actually contested, the concepts or what the concepts represent⁶⁸? If the contestation is primarily about what the concepts represent, it is not the contestable nature of concepts we should be focused on as they are merely contested as a by-product of the underlying contestation that may be characterized as ‘essential’ if it is “structurally necessary”. Naturally, whatever it is that might be called structurally necessary in this respect is very likely a matter of some controversy but at least the first superficial obstacle, the mistaken assumption that certain concepts by virtue of their nature as having some special characteristics are what is actually contested i.e. the source of contestability, is taken care of. I do believe that to be the case in the phenomenon Gallie is

⁶⁸ Now I want to remind the reader about our discussion in section 2.1 (esp. fn.23). It was stated that the essentially contested concept is “appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement” (Gallie 1956a: 171). Moreover, “this achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole”. The third condition was that “the accredited achievement is initially variously describable” (ibid. 171–2.) Later on it was contented that what is developed further by those disputing the essentially contested concept is the achievement of the original exemplar. What is this mysterious ‘achievement’? Is it a part of a concept or something the concept represents?

describing, the phenomenon that seems to generate endless debates *involving*⁶⁹, typically, certain kind of concepts. In chapter 3 I attempt to outline an alternative perspective to the issue that is not susceptible to the confusion regarding the source of essential contestability mentioned above.

John Gray has discussed Gallie's original thesis in two related articles, in which he raises a concern about the rational unresolvability of disputes involving essentially contested concepts, the unresolvability which, according to him, can lead to skeptical nihilism and conceptual relativism (Gray 1977 and 1978)⁷⁰. Gray identifies two main sources for concern in this regard: the presumed norm/value-dependency and the open texture of the essentially contested concepts (Gray 1977: 339–42). He also assumes that the strongest variant of the thesis of essential contestability has too wide a scope concerning the logical status of opposing conceptions which, in effect, restricts the range of possible accounts that can be given regarding a concept that is contested (ibid. 338–9). I evaluate the merits of his criticism which is especially important as it goes a long way to answer a broader question of what is the actual scope of Gallie's theory. In the end, I hope, we have a clearer sense of what are the necessary corrections that need to be made in addition to the ones already mentioned while the seven basic conditions of essentially contested concepts were discussed. While it is, in my opinion, quite obvious that Gallie is pursuing something substantively important as well as meaningful with his notion of essentially contested concepts it still remains to be seen what sort of "enlightenment of a much needed kind" he is actually pursuing, or offering. The last two conditions, which purportedly demarcate essentially contested concepts from "radically confused" concepts, are highly controversial and do not seem to establish solid standards for that purpose⁷¹.

⁶⁹ The word 'involve' is ever important here; the endless debates are not *about* certain type of concepts. Actually, the phrasing of the issue as the attempt to understand the intractability of pervasive disputes involving certain kind of concepts is the self-described starting point of Gallie's article. This is another example of how his focus tends to alternate between linguistic autonomy and social determination confusing the issue somewhat needlessly.

⁷⁰ It must be noted from the outset that although Gray rejects the specific thesis of essential contestability as it is proposed by Gallie, he sees the central insights of the thesis as salvageable if certain adjustments are made. In "On Liberty, Liberalism and Essential Contestability" (1978) the general tone of criticism against Gallie's original theory is somewhat mitigated when compared to the rather straightforward assault undertaken in "On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts". I will go over the general adjustments proposed by Gray in the course of the current section.

⁷¹ John Gray states that he does not have a "quarrel" with the first five conditions (Gray 1978: 390). However, "it is far from clear what are the distinguishing marks of the kind of social and conceptual change which confers on a concept an essentially contested character" (Gray 1977: 337). By Gallie's own words that should be clear after the introduction of the last two conditions into the theory (Gallie 1956a: 180).

According to Gray, there are three distinct variants of any thesis of essential contestability. 1) The weakest variant confuses cultural and historical variability (often cited as evidence of concept's contestability) of a concept to be the criterion of its essential contestability. "All interesting and important contestability theses go far beyond this weak version in which the fact of a concept's contestability can be established by empirical means alone, and in which a concept's contestability is, indeed, constituted by its 'contestedness'" (ibid. 338)⁷². 2) The stronger option would be to try to show by argument "the inconclusiveness of debates about the criteria of correct application of a concept" (ibid.) i.e. if there are no logically coercive reasons for privileging one conception over another, there is good reason to doubt claims of superiority made by disputants and "to regard its proper use as disputable" (ibid.). This requires one to make some philosophical judgments i.e. the fact of contestedness cannot be established by empirical means alone⁷³. 3) A concept may be called contested if "its subject matter is in its nature such that there are always good reasons for disputing the propriety of any of its uses" (ibid.)⁷⁴. Gray calls this strongest version of essential contestability thesis as 'essential contestability proper' distinguishing it from 'contestedness' and 'contestability', the first two variants (ibid. 339).

John Gray claims that "any strong variant of an essential contestability thesis must precipitate its proponents into a radical (and probably self-defeating) skeptical nihilism" (ibid. 343) meaning most notably Gallie's original thesis, or any thesis that falls under

⁷² This sense of contestability is very similar with the conception of 'hotly contested' by Terence Ball (1999). In the same article, he introduces notions of 'sore concept' and 'core concept' while discussing contested ideologies which, when combined, produce a result very similar to Gallie's conception. As Ball rejects Gallie's theory, the relation between ideas presented in that article and Gallie's original theory are unclear. Anthony Birch, drawing from Ball's criticism of Gallie's theory as ahistorical (see esp. Ball 1988:14) prefers the use of 'currently contestable' which corresponds also with the sense meant by Gray (Birch 1993: 8–9). Nonetheless, I have to also point out to an earlier remarks by Barry Clarke, according to which the source for essential contestability that is found outside the particular attributes of concepts may produce contestedness (in a sense meant by Gray) about these same concepts. Naturally, in that case, we should not dub these concepts as 'essentially contestable'.

⁷³ When different conceptions of a concept and criteria the concept consists of are seen as separate and self-sufficient alternatives which are then compared, there doesn't seem to be conclusive and, most emphatically, no logically coercive, reasons to be had for their respective evaluation. According to my interpretation, the conception of essential contestability preferred by John Gray falls also under this label (Gray 1977: 344–7; Gray 1978: 394–5; 402) although at times he refers to the reflexive nature of the subject matter as one source of contestability (Gray 1978: 393–4). Another argument for contestability that could be placed under this label would be the notion arising out of stipulation according to which the disagreement about a certain concept is constitutive of that concept

⁷⁴ For example, Birch claims that "(A)n essentially contested or, better, essentially contestable concept is one that is so permeated and surrounded by values that reasonable men may argue interminably without ever reaching agreement on the true meaning and implications of the concept" (Birch 1993:8). All interpretations of essential contestability that view the essentialness of contestation as following directly from the subject matter essentially contested concepts are referring to fall under this category. Value pluralism in which values are seen as radically incommensurable with each other would lead naturally to this conclusion

‘essential contestability proper’. First of all, to even identify a concept as ‘essentially contested’ “is to repudiate a wide range of restrictive or exclusivist, descriptivist or essentialist claims which are characteristically made for it by each of its rival user” (ibid. 336)⁷⁵. From this point it follows that “to characterize a concept as having an essentially contested character is to announce the result of a conceptual analysis which is not neutral about the logical status of the concept under investigation” (ibid.). Thus, to assume a view of essential contestability (in a sense given to it by Gallie) is to always be “philosophically partisan” since it is to exclude “as illegitimate all arguments seeking to show the virtual equivalence of the term’s meaning and the criteria of its correct application” (Gray 1977: 336). While keeping in mind the point made above, let us consider the following statement from Gray:

“In other words, to say of a concept that it is essentially contested in this third and very strong sense [essential contestability proper] is not to make a deduction from a standpoint that somehow transcends all definitional disputes about the concept, but rather is to proffer a philosophically partisan understanding of the character of the dispute itself. Indeed, it may be that any characterization of a concept as essentially contested is so deeply and radically nonneutral that it must itself be seen as essentially contested⁷⁶” (Gray 1977: 338–9, brackets added).

Gray is naturally right to insist that no transcendence in this regard is possible; the thesis of essential contestability is admittedly a certain viewpoint to the matter or a description of certain sort of pervasive dispute about which other characterizations can be made. However, one must be very clear about this matter. First of all, if the thesis of essential contestability is a description of a dispute in which two or more opposing conceptions about certain concept clash—whether they are made by Utilitarians, Idealists or others—and the concept that is disputed—whether it is ‘good’, ‘justice’ or some other—is identified as ‘essentially contested’ by the participants (i.e. participants are seen as essentially contesting it), what does it actually imply? First of all, let’s take into consideration the observations made by Barry Clarke earlier. Basically, we have two options: 1) we are subscribing to the notion of linguistic autonomy meaning that there must be some characteristic, attribute or property in a concept itself rendering it essentially contestable; 2) we are seeing the phenomenon of essential contestability as socially

⁷⁵ “To characterize as essentially contested the concept of goodness, for example, means to reject all the diverse definist claims made for it by Utilitarians, Idealists, and others” (Gray 1977: 336).

⁷⁶ Gray’s phrase “essentially contested in this third and very strong sense” is interchangeable, as I see it, with Clarke’s term “essentially contestable”.

determined meaning that the source of essential contestability is found outside the characteristics of a concept itself. Then, consider two conceptions of ‘democracy’ at odds with each other: the first party champions for the notion that highlights “effective participation”, adequate and equal opportunities to form their preference and place questions on the public agenda, while the second party sees “inclusiveness”, the requirement that each and every citizen has legitimate and equal stake regarding political process within a state. For the sake of clarity, let’s dub these conceptions A) “effective participation conception” and B) “inclusiveness conception”⁷⁷. The next step, of course, is the dispute between these two conceptions i.e. “effective participation conception” versus “inclusiveness conception”. I will now assess the first option outlined above in relation to Gray’s arguments. The second option is taken under scrutiny later on.

Thus, Gray is asserting that to characterize the concept of ‘democracy’ now under dispute as ‘essentially contested’ is to “announce the result of a conceptual analysis which is not neutral about the logical status of the concept under investigation” and to be philosophically partisan in a debate in which participants holding conceptions A and B try to “show the virtual equivalence of the term’s meaning and the criteria of its correct application.” (Gray 1977: 336.) Although Gray does not characterize the issue in same terms as Clarke, I assume that one subscribing to the specific notion according to which the source of essential contestability is grounded on linguistic autonomy has to assert that there is a property or characteristic in the concept of ‘democracy’ that guarantees endless disputes of it. In that way, those wanting to show the virtual equivalence of the term’s meaning and the criteria of its correct application are not even speaking about the same type of concept although both name it as ‘democracy’. From the view point of those seeing the source of essential contestability as a matter of linguistic autonomy, disputants A and B are just plainly mistaken in their efforts to outline one or more pertinent criteria for the concept of ‘democracy’ since there is a property X found in a concept rendering it essentially contestable. From this perspective Gray’s conjecture that “any strong variant of an essential contestability thesis must precipitate its proponents into a radical (and probably self-defeating) skeptical nihilism” (ibid. 343) is more than reasonable. Of course, one can conceive other reasons to have a dispute of this kind but it would not be about “concepts” (as linguistically autonomous). And indeed, until a property of a concept able

⁷⁷ These criteria for ‘democracy’ are actually two of five criteria for the ideal democracy outlined by Robert Dahl in *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989). The other three are “voting equality”, “enlightened understanding” and “control of the agenda”.

to fill this role is identified, the radical skepticism is not warranted. It is time to go over two possible sources identified by Gray that, if proven to exist, would justify this skeptical attitude.

Concerning the norm-dependency as one possible source for the ambiguity and vagueness encountered in the case of socio-political concepts, the main thrust of Gray's criticism is directed against a notion according to which the framework of essentially contested concepts is neutral. Gray makes use of two separate but interconnected lines of criticism: 1) the (strong) thesis of essential contestability assumes certain understanding of values as the primary source of essential contestability (values being perhaps incommensurable with each other) (Gray 1977: 339–41; Gray 1978: 392–3), or 2) the thesis of essential contestability “reflects (so far as it is acceptable) the pluralist, morally and politically polyarchic character of contemporary Western liberal society” (Gray 1977: 336–7; Gray 1978: 388). I will now evaluate these notions in turn.

Regarding the first line of criticism, values as the primary source of essential contestability, Gray points out that in order to avoid moral relativism, one subscribing to the thesis of essential contestability must assume some sort of ethical nonnaturalism “if the essential contestability of a concept derives primarily from the norm-dependency of its uses (where the norms are “open to choice” in the sense that rational argument cannot show any set of norms to be uniquely appropriate)” (Gray 1977: 339)⁷⁸. Ethical naturalism with its assumption that we could indeed deduct appropriate norms from empirical state of affairs is naturally unsuited for the thesis of essential contestability purporting the source of dispute to be found in the normative character of concepts. Another prime candidate for the unfilled spot of value/norm-dependency, for example, would be Berlinian account of value pluralism which would guarantee essential contestability of concepts connected to values due to the incommensurability of those values.

Gray also identifies another sort of norm-dependency as one possible source for essential contestability that merits attention. Consider the following:

⁷⁸ Note the following objection from Robert Grafstein: “Gray... argues that the thesis of essential contestability unjustifiably presupposes that we know ethical naturalism is incorrect, or at least that normative issues cannot be resolved [here Grafstein refers to (Gray 1978: 392), see below]. This objection seems unnecessarily strong. As we will see, the realist need not in this case make any claims about what, if anything, might justify values, only that we are caused to believe in a variety of them and in a variety of conceptual schemes” (Grafstein 1988: 18 fn.12, brackets added). I agree with both of them. Gray's criticism is on the mark regarding its object, which is indeed a harsh, but quite justifiable interpretation of Gallie's thesis, while Grafstein is right to insist that other interpretations regarding the phenomenon in general are certainly possible—and a generous reader of Gallie might view him as meaning some of them (reasons for this are presented throughout my study but a quick exposition on the issue is found in chapter 4).

“The tenor of his paper is that the major source of a concept's essential contestedness is the normative standard embodied by its criteria. This is to say that a concept is essentially contested if its rival uses express competing moral and political perspectives. Those who disagree in their understanding of such an essentially contested concept as power [or] ...freedom, for example, do so in virtue of their rival moral and political commitments. Different views of power and freedom are propagated aggressively and defensively, on this account, so as to endorse and promote the distinctive claims of conflicting ways of life” (Gray 1978: 392, brackets added).

In the earlier article, Gray states that “it will be the upshot of my argument that essentially contested concepts find their characteristic uses within conceptual frameworks which have endorsement functions in respect of definite forms of social life” (Gray 1977: 332). This is a point well worth to keep in mind while assessing his criticism. According to Gray, the core notion of essential contestability is that “its subject matter is such as to be inherently liable to intractable controversy” (Gray 1978: 392). The fact that background normative standards are invoked or concept’s use presupposes some evaluative judgments “will support the claim that this concept is essentially contested only if normative concepts are similarly contestable” (ibid.). After establishing this, Gray sees that there are two options: 1) either the merits of rival conceptions can be settled by reason which would in effect empty the class of essentially contested concepts, or 2) if basic evaluative judgments are “open to choice” we cannot speak of a contest occurring at all, since contests “have a point only when there is something that is not treated as contestable” (ibid.). In Gray’s opinion, this sort of essential contestability in virtue of norm-invoking functions of the (essentially contested) concepts “effectively precludes debates about these concepts from susceptibility to rational settlement for as long as we accept the view—endorsed by Gallie—that the ultimate questions of morality and politics cannot be answered by an appeal to reason” (ibid.). If there is no rational resolution to be had, the situation is describable as evidencing deep incommensurability.

I guess there are a couple of possible rejoinders to Gray’s criticism in this respect. The first and most obvious is to argue that the concept do not invoke background normative standards but we should take those standards into account some other way; for instance, we should see these standards not unlike Gray himself who does not want to abandon a central insight of the notion of essential contestability states...

“...that contenders in any such definitional dispute will typically be found to disagree about the correct criteria of a whole range of

contextually related concepts, where these disagreements are not haphazard or random, but will tend to be mutually supportive or interlocking. Each use of a contested concept of this kind typically rests upon, presupposes, or endorses a definite use of a whole constellation of satellite concepts, so that definitional disputes in relation to such concepts are indicative of conflicts between divergent patterns of thought-which are often, if not typically, partly constitutive of rival ways of life” (Gray 1977: 344) .

Another possible response, more of a retort really, would be to invoke the famous “so what?” argument i.e. everything that Gray said would be confirmed but wouldn’t be seen as a problem. It could actually work in this particular instance but also would commit oneself to the position most untenable when considering the arguments preceding this particular discussion; especially this would have a detrimental effect on keeping the contestation on in a civilized manner if disputants are aware of the nature of the dispute. Not to mention the fact that one would be committed to somewhat radical moral relativism in which it would be rather hard indeed to identify the dispute as a definitional *contest*. More nuanced answers are also possible but if one would want to keep his position firmly on the ground prepared by Gallie, the phrase “not resolvable by argument of any kind” would surely haunt till the end.

The second line of criticism, namely Gray’s claim of the thesis of essential contestability as arising out of pluralist, and typically Western, point of view, is very interesting since, if found plausible, it goes a long way to explain the socially determined character of essential contestability. In the previous section regarding the seventh condition, progressive competition, I insinuated with the help of Mouffe and Habermas that Gallie’s chosen perspective might be intimately tied to the liberal political culture. This is especially damning for Gallie’s theory attempting to find the source of contestability in properties of concepts alone. Barry Clarke contended earlier that to see any “essentiality” in perceived contestability thought as socially determined, one must show that these contests are “structurally necessary”. If the matter of contestability is straightforwardly reducible to our current historical situation, it is certainly socially determined but not “essential” in a sense Gallie is using the term.

Gray offers a perspective for viewing the thesis of essential contestability deeply related to the liberal/pluralist framework which is somewhat similar to the one discussed in the section 2.6 (in relation to Mouffe and Habermas). He sees a definitive connection

between the way different conceptions are treated in liberal societies committed to the pluralism of values and Gallie's thesis of essential contestability.

“But for one who, like Berlin, acknowledges the contestedness of the concept of freedom, liberalism is likely to be conceived as expressing the meta-theoretical claim that a collision of incommensurable ends is an ineliminable (and perhaps also, the defining) feature of political life. On the latter view, a liberal society will be identified not by its adherence to any ideal, but rather in the fact that it comprehends contending ideals, between which it is the business of politics to arbitrate” (Gray 1978: 388)

Thus, the idea of essential contestability is now seen by Gray as a description of how we should view conflicting conceptions expressed in the public realm. In the introduction I already mentioned that some of the most prominent liberal theorists that have formed their theories for the purpose of treating different conceptions equally as possible have likely been influenced to a considerable degree by just the sort of considerations Gallie has put forward—some even directly. When Gray contends that “...although there is almost endless room for debate about the implications of the equal-liberty principle, and while this openness as to the potential applications of its basic principles is something I will treat as characteristic of liberalism⁷⁹, it is a maxim that is plausibly distinctive to liberalism, and is not unconnected... with the thesis that social and political concepts are essentially contested” (ibid. 388) he is supporting the interpretation already established as a possibility in this study which I heartily agree with.

However, the interesting implication of this is not chicken/egg type of question of primacy but the notion that the account of essential contestability is a product of modern liberal/pluralist way of thinking. I find Gray's assertion that “(T)o identify a concept as essentially contested is to say a great deal about the kind of society in which its users live”

⁷⁹ Interestingly, Ian Shapiro (Shapiro 1989, see esp. 51–2, 55, 60) identifies a tendency of liberalists (from Locke and Mill to present day) to shift implicitly between deontological and consequentialists reasoning even if the explicit purpose of the theorist is to remain faithful only to one or another. The thesis of essential contestability focusing on the nature of concepts would justify this lack of theoretical rigor if found true—because the matter of choosing between different deontological and consequentialist criteria for ‘freedom’, or placing them in right ranking order (e.g. Rawlsian lexical order of the principles of justice), would be a matter essentially contestable in principle. Someone not as generous as me might point out that an attempt to produce a thesis of essential contestability might be seen as an attempt to justify this failure to construct a coherent liberal outlook or theory in general. For instance, Michael Rhodes points out that “[the notion of essentially contested concept] has been treated as an excuse that, rather than acknowledge that the failure to reach agreement is due to such factors as imprecision, ignorance, or belligerence, instead theorists point to the terms and concepts under dispute and insist that they are always open to contest—that they are terms and concepts about which we can never expect to reach agreement” (Rhodes 2000: 1). See also Shapiro's scathing criticism against academics reinforcing certain intellectual division of labor by dealing with overtly simplified ‘gross concepts’ (Shapiro 1989: 66–9).

(Gray 1977: 337) to hit the mark nicely, and he strengthens the argument in another article by claiming that “(U)nless there is some agreement about what a democracy or a just society looks like, we have no reason to characterize a conflict as a conceptual contest. In our own society, however, a striking feature of disputes about democracy and social justice is that no consensus exists as to their central applications” (Gray 1978: 391). I find it plausible that Gallie attempted to universalize certain perceivable aspects of conceptual grammar in social and political sciences by constructing a theory resting on aforementioned philosophical judgments about the nature of the pervasive disputes involving conflicts over the definitions of some key socio-political concepts. As such, that attempt cannot be characterized as relativistic although the phenomenon in question, essential contestability, might just be something intimately connected to our cultural and historical condition. Be that as it may, Gray’s claim needs more evidence to back it up. It is not enough to assert that the idea of essential contestability crops up more easily in a society that fosters the equal-liberty principle, although “we can identify social orders in which essentially contested concepts are rare or unknown, so also it is evident that any given concept acquires a contested character along with (I do not say "because of") the occurrence of certain definite changes in social structure” (Gray 1977: 336–7). Despite the plausibility of Gray’s conjecture, we have to be careful in not assuming too much. It is still quite possible to see the thesis of essential contestability as emerging out of the realization of the fact (true or false) that we do not seem to possess conceptual resources to justify one conception over another in a conclusive way. But the fact that our Western social structure has formed as it has does not surely hinder one to think that there is a connection that is not only coincidental.

The second potential source of essential contestability identified by Gray is the notion that the open texture of the concepts guarantees the status of these concepts as “essentially contested”. According to him, this too leads ultimately to vices of relativism. At the very beginning, it must be emphasized that Gray is not criticizing the fourth condition by Gallie, openness, he targets the view that sees this openness as the primary source of essential contestability. As stated by Gray (1977), there is no real difference between the concepts used in social and natural sciences regarding (strictly) their degree of openness. The subject matter of social sciences is human behavior which requires one to make evaluative judgments but this in itself has no real impact on the openness of the concepts. (ibid. 340–1).

“Yet, manifestly, the indeterminacy and open texture of concepts denoting human actions and social situations will generate potentially unresolvable disputes about their proper application only if it is true... that the latter cannot be characterized adequately in the language of the observer. By the same token, definitional disputes unresolvable by rational argument will be created only if problems of radical translation and loss of meaning effectively prevent any among the disputants from plausibly contending that his description and explanation of the actions of the observed agent must be privileged over those of his rivals.” (Gray 1977: 341).

Gray makes a salient point here, one that needs a closer attention. First of all, it has to be pointed out that Gray focuses on the problem of radical translation and loss of meaning for argumentative purposes; I do not doubt that he would actually think that the loss of meaning due to the problem of translation would not be a real phenomenon. This binary approach is, perhaps, justified since Gallie’s original thesis seems to be drawing that absolute line first in claiming that the disputes involving essentially contested concepts are not resolvable by an argument of any kind. Thus, the gist of Gray’s argument is not unlike the one encountered earlier regarding the norm-dependency (in the first sense discussed); incommensurability enters into the picture in a form of conceptual frameworks that are rationally incommensurable. “It is to advance an incommensurability thesis in respect of the conceptual frameworks within which uses of an open-textured (or essentially contested) concept occur, and to subscribe to an ambitious thesis of conceptual relativism” (ibid. 341). The thesis of conceptual relativism faces a self-referential paradox subjecting it to analogous relativization if the neutrality of the theory cannot be established. More importantly, though, when linked to the notion of essential contestability seeing the contest in question as a definitional dispute it is hard to imagine what exactly the definitional dispute is about if the conceptual frameworks are mutually unintelligible. Without some common ground “their constituent concepts cannot be “contested,” even though their proponents are in conflict” (ibid. 342). One must remember, though, that the reason for conditions (VI) and (VII) is to distinguish the essentially contested concept from “the kind of concept which can be shown, as a result of analysis or experiment, to be radically confused” (Gallie 1956a: 180). In light of this, it would be rather odd to claim that Gallie tries to advance some sort of incommensurability thesis when he tries de facto to find a common ground for identifying contested concepts and to demarcate them from radically confused ones. Even if he failed to do so, it clearly was his purpose. Thus, this particular objection does not sit well with Gallie’s thesis although it might do so against other

variants of essential contestability thesis. On the other hand, if Gallie's purpose was to locate the source of contestability within a (essentially contested) concept itself, one is tempted to make a conclusion that it is Gallie himself who is confused since he seems to talk about two different explanations in the guise of one coherent theory⁸⁰.

Considering Gray's views on the norm-dependency and open texture of concepts as the sources for essential contestability it is no wonder that he sees the end result of the strong thesis of essential contestability to be...

“...prolegomena to a radical Pyrrhonian skepticism according to which we have no way of deciding when a dispute about a concept's proper use is rationally settleable and when it is not, and so, trivially, no way of deciding when we have used a concept correctly. For the nub of such a radically skeptical (or meta-skeptical) view is the claim that we lack criteria of rationality by reference to which we might determine whether any (moral, definitional, or philosophical) dispute can be settled by an appeal to reason” (Gray 1977: 343).

Even if one would not be entirely satisfied with Gray's arguments it surely is a powerful rejoinder to all essential contestability theses leaving too many questions unanswered. As such, Gray's points will serve as issues needing to be addressed in the next chapter of the study in which I try to complement Gallie's original notion where needed (e.g. a conception of rationality) and make adjustments and corrections where necessary (e.g. the need for 'practical closure' and negative valuation). Speaking of the possibility to cobble together a thesis able to incorporate central insights of essential contestability in a plausible manner, what about the alternative option for linguistic autonomy, the notion according to which essential contestability is socially determined? Should we, *pace* Clarke, “delete all references either to essentially contestable or to essentially contested concepts” (ibid. 126.)? Moreover, would that specific approach be “philosophically partisan” in the sense illustrated by Gray above or would it fall short regarding Gray's other, quite plentiful criticism? So far, no such approach has been taken, but we can briefly entertain ourselves by speculating the possible form the account of essential contestability identifying the source of contestability outside the characteristics of concepts should take.

⁸⁰ It is yet again the term 'essential' that leads me to this conclusion. I do not claim that one could not construct a theory incorporating several explanations for the contestability perceived but we are primarily interested in the question of what renders the encountered pervasiveness of some socio-political disputes 'essential'. For that purpose we seem to need one good explanation instead of several possible reasons each of which increases the contestability by a certain (but not essential) degree.

First of all, the focus should be shifted to the nature of the dispute *involving* conceptual definitions but *not being about* conceptual definitions. That does not mean that various definitions are not made while disputing views of others. Indeed, different interpretations occur in abundance in conflicts where contestants try to make their point aggressively or defensively. But we are not really interested in those conceptions, are we? The phenomenon of essential contestability is primarily about the intractability of the debates that are going on without a clear victor emerging out of them. It might be that there are linguistically autonomous conceptual reasons behind those disputes although none have been found, but even if there would be, they would not address the question why disputants feel the need to deny alternative conceptions proposed by each other. What is at stake in these conflicts?

I claim that John Gray has already given light to the partial answer to this question. According to Gray, concepts essentially contested in a sense meant by Gallie are the concepts finding “their characteristic uses within conceptual frameworks which have endorsement functions in respect of definite forms of life” (Gray 1977:332) and they are propagated aggressively and defensively in order to endorse and promote “the distinctive claims of conflicting ways of life” (Gray 1978: 392). As ‘cluster concepts’ that are diversely describable⁸¹, fixed sets of criteria explicitly defined are hard to articulate since concept’s criteria seem to “spill out” to span the definitions and criteria of other concepts similarly elusive—we need “a whole constellation of satellite concepts” (Gray 1977:344). For instance, in attempting to define ‘justice’ one is almost sure to stumble into ‘equality’ which should be defined in turn, and so on. Thus, what is actually contested in these disputes is not “merely” a conception about some concept but parts of conceptual frameworks defining in a very concrete sense how one holding them perceive the surrounding social reality, and in a very real sense, how one carves one’s surroundings to be what they are⁸². There is indeed a normative standard in sight but it is not embodied within a concept, it is evidenced by the conceptual frameworks—in which the concept in question gains its normative character in relation to other concepts playing similar function—through which the concept is evaluated. In this case we could use a simpler term ‘normative frameworks’ with which to note this functioning of one’s conceptual

⁸¹ See sections 2.2 and 2.3.

⁸² Thus, definitional dispute can be a banal affair but it is almost sure to become quite heated when complete patterns of thought linked to substantive forms of life seem to hang on the answer regarding the definition of a certain concept. To change one’s mind, so to speak, about one central socio-political concept significantly would quite likely send reverberations throughout the whole pattern.

frameworks. That is the reason behind the notion that “definitional disputes in relation to such concepts are indicative of conflicts between divergent patterns of thought-which are often, if not typically, partly constitutive of rival ways of life” (Gray 1977: 344). The source for contestability is now seen as socially determined. This must be so since rival ways or forms of life are socially determined if anything. But one must still produce a suitable conception of rationality and to show how the contestation between various forms of life can be considered “essential”.

From what has been said, it seems that the explanation of the phenomenon of essential contestability cannot be plausibly asserted in terms of the characteristics of concepts alone. With solely referring to concepts and their criteria (along with the binary logic of assuming that a criterion is either shared or not) the overall situation surely looks like that of incommensurability (in hard cases) even though we would take into account the revisions made by William Connolly (‘cluster concepts’) that all criteria are not pertinent in every case at the same time. It would seem that the phenomenon of essential contestability is a much more complicated than Gallie assumed⁸³.

2.8 Social particulars

In this section I take under scrutiny the role of social particulars in relation to essential contestability. The central, and hopefully non-controversial, assumption on which the findings of the present section are based is that in order to have a contest at all there must be some general framework shared by the contestants within which the contestation can go on in the first place⁸⁴. We can roughly divide the elements present in socio-political disputes to those that are contested and to those that are not. What is important to realize, though, is the fact that even if the agreement about some social particulars provide ground

⁸³ Although the scope of the theory Gallie is advocating is far from clear he can also be (generously) interpreted as making a substantive point that the situation may be quite legitimately characterized as involving essentially *contested* concepts as opposed to essentially *contestable* concepts. In this case we would heavily favor the social aspects of his original thesis. It may be that our current understanding of the situation is historically conditioned and contingent, but that only serves to strengthen the notion of there being exemplars of some sort conditioning our understanding. This would not imply a radical relativism since it presumes a structure of understanding conditioned by historical context. Nonetheless, the fact that Gallie’s thesis is, at times, lacking with respect to this line of thought and goes even to contradict it, at other times, I have to conclude that it is not enough to revision it. A better framework altogether must be produced.

⁸⁴ This is also true in relation to conceptual contests as definitional disputes. John Gray notes that “(U)nless there is some agreement about what a democracy or a just society looks like, we have no reason to characterize a conflict as a conceptual contest” (Gray 1978: 391). I interpret him to mean that if the persons have differing views on what kind is a just society, they have a disagreement that is not merely definitional, but goes a lot deeper to differing conceptions to how one should live one’s life with others.

for the deeper contestation to flourish, the acknowledgment of certain set of social particulars guide and shape the actual debates involving (but not being strictly caused by) ambiguous and vague socio-political concepts such as ‘justice’, ‘common good’ et cetera⁸⁵. It is not uncommon either to see some undoubtedly factual social particulars like gender and social status as hindrances to common agreement about key socio-political issues that are typically hotly contested. I start by examining Norman S. Care’s notion of ‘practical closure’ more closely before moving on to the matter of social particulars. The besetting sin evident in the works of many philosophers and political theorists concentrating on the nature of concepts is pointed out by Ian Shapiro: empirical questions are much too often overlooked which can cloud the real issues from sight. It can even be argued that this practice may result in one to assume the contestability of the object matter on wrong grounds. I will briefly examine his insightful comments on the issue most relevant to the task at hand in the end of the present section.

In section 2.2 I briefly introduced Norman S. Care’s (1973⁸⁶) notion of the possibility of ‘practical closure’. Care gladly admits that such a closure is probably temporary and the generalizations derived from it by social scientists are not objective in the sense that one couldn’t conceive the situation to be different now or in the future (ibid. 14–5). However, “it still does not follow that the results of their [social scientists] efforts are uninformative or unilluminating about social life” (ibid. 13, brackets added; see also 15–6). Although the practical closures (in social sciences) are temporal and contingent by nature, they do not rest on arbitrary positions of social actors. The situation of practical closure is not actualized haphazardly although “(T)hey are at most "our" decisions as participants, in the sense that we—or most of us, or the most established or powerful of us—live with them and act in accordance with them, until circumstances or persons or

⁸⁵ The ‘original position’ presented in *Theory of Justice* (1971) by John Rawls and the criticism it has received is a nice illustration of this more of a general point. What makes, in part, the idea of original position so controversial is the set of social particulars those choosing the principles of justice are aware of along with those they are ignorant about and the assumptions concerning their moral psychology made by Rawls. In order to define essentially contested concept of ‘justice’ Rawls has first to frame the situation in which the principles of justice are chosen accordingly. However, to characterize his project as an attempt to define ‘justice’ as some sort of technical enterprise would be a serious mistake since his argument proceeds from certain social particulars taken for granted while the others are supposedly not taken into account to the choosing of principles of justice. Naturally, the argumentative method chosen by him makes this much clearer than is the case in most instances of theorizing, not to mention disputes in actual social life.

⁸⁶ In the article “On Fixing Social Concepts” (1973), Care raises an issue of importance which have to be overlooked for now: “If it should turn out that social concepts may be essentially contestable for social scientists but somehow not be essentially contestable for participants in institutions and parties to practices, it may be that the importance of the thesis is limited somewhat” (ibid. 14). For the present purpose it suffices to say that the degree of reflection may vary depending on the person engaging in it. More comprehensive treatment of the issue has to be postponed (cf. Pennanen 2012).

pressures of some sort bring us to review, qualify, modify, or change them” (ibid. 15). Care claims that “there are certain very basic social concepts that are not essentially contestable, though they might indeed be essentially incomplete” and that “the conflicts that are settled by merely practical closure involve, characteristically, arguments from and debates over the interests, expectations, ideologies, and customs of persons who are, in a sense I will try to explain, aware of themselves” (ibid.) which make it possible to achieve a practical closure in certain issues despite the fact that people often hold incommensurable world-views on a more substantial level. As an example of practical closure Care mentions “a common understanding of the social concepts of torture, war, and prisoners of war” (ibid.) that can be achieved.

“...we can establish that, say, 65-75 percent of prisoners "break" under torture in a way that meets the expectations of those who have captured them. This generalization, I imagine, may be of interest to us, or some of us. What is important to the present subject, however, is that the thesis of essential contestability does not show either that this kind of generalization cannot be produced by social science or that it cannot be sound” (ibid. 16).

Care is right to insist that although we would embrace the notion of essential contestability, it does not prevent the soundness of these sorts of generalizations. However, a suitably informative thesis of essential contestability could capture something elementary about the definitional disputes in which participants argue about the concept of ‘torture’, some of them dismissing the negative valuation attached to it altogether preferring the use of ‘enhanced interrogation’, for example⁸⁷. It is worthy of notice that Care does not give the reader an explicit example of ‘incomplete social concept’, not to mention ‘essentially incomplete’. His treatise of the issue revolves around social particulars that are likely to be so widely shared that a common understanding could be formed around them providing necessary stability for further contestation to take place intelligibly. I would guess that these social particulars are also examples of practical closures, although very widely shared “until circumstances or persons or pressures of some sort bring us to review, qualify, modify, or change them” (ibid. 15).

⁸⁷ Since Care’s article was written in 1973 he was perhaps unaware that this kind of matter may turn into quite “sharp” and technical definitional dispute even in the public domain, as is clear to those of us who observed the debate about ‘torture’ in the United States during the Bush (Jr) administration. This sort of “general understanding” is usually the first casualty of such a conflict in which considerations of the type of “Jack Bauer- logic” (named after the protagonist of TV- hit series “24” in which one has 24 hours to prevent some terrorist threat of cataclysmic proportions) may capture the imagination of the people better.

“My thought is that while the argument, debate, and conflict... are a main factor in our understanding of the identity over time of social particulars, there is a more primitive level of identification of social particulars on which an element of stability is available as a guide. This level of identification is logically prior to the level on which the arguments, debates, and conflicts of participants are a main factor. It is the level on which we identify a set of institutions and practices as, *for example, a legal system, or an economic system, or a form of politics*. The element of stability that guides us here is not "law-governedness"; it is rather, I think, a group of minimal, noncontroversial truisms about persons and their environment” (Care 1973: 17–18, italics by me).

Thus, the primitive level of identification of social particulars providing an element of stability goes before every deep contestation of socio-political concepts in persistent disputes. This foundation should not be confused, however, with absolute certainty of some or another set of basic propositions. “These basic truisms are not controversial, so far as I can see, though this is not because they are necessary truths. Logically, they are contingent propositions, and we can imagine a world in which they are not true” (ibid. 18). Yet, as Care himself argues as well, we would not recognize the world in which they are not true as our own. To my mind, Care is describing ‘presumptions’ behind each and every social or political dispute⁸⁸. It is more than likely that these presumptions may vary to some degree between different persons and behind various positions on social issues (although I am not sure whether Care himself would subscribe to this “weakening” of his position).

In the light of the purpose of this study Care’s observations about the possibility of the practical closure are of significant importance. When the clear need for the notion was first introduced in section 2.2 it looked to be just a minor adjustment, albeit a necessary one. But with the notion of practical closure at the table the question “which practical closures we already acknowledge and embrace?” emerges naturally. There is certain beauty in the idea that stability so much craved for could be found, at least partially, in contingent social facts. Regarding the criticism by John Gray in the previous section the big question is “how should we view the incommensurability of conceptual frameworks

⁸⁸ Mind you, the content of presumptions can be, and quite often is, factual. The matter of ‘presumptions’ in relation to practical argumentation is discussed more comprehensively in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012). The idea of contingent social particulars providing much needed stability for essential contestability to reign safely is a very intriguing notion that deserves further thought. The most famous historical example is undoubtedly René Descartes who vowed to hold certain social particulars of his own before embracing the method of radical doubt. Perhaps we shouldn’t view it as an odd curiosity but rather as an indication of the great hold these presumptions have over us.

and problem of translation in the light of practical closure?" I will get back to this matter in chapter 3⁸⁹.

Ian Shapiro makes a convincing case in his article "Gross Concepts in Political Argument" (1989) for a notion that political theorists often fail to take a sufficient notice of the fact that "any claim about how politics is to be organized must be a relational claim involving agents, actions, legitimacy, and ends"⁹⁰ (Shapiro 1989: 51). He denies that moral questions can be separated from empirical ones by a "theoretical sleight of hand" (my own expression). The terms used in political philosophy and theory attain their meaning in relation to political claims which are partly empirical but empirical questions are bracketed when theorized about (ibid. 67). This practice produces 'gross concepts' for a theorist to deal with:

"They reduce what are actually relational claims to claims about one or another of the components of the relation. This not only obscures the phenomena they wish to analyze, it also generates debates that can never be resolved because the alternatives that are opposed to one another are vulnerable within their own terms... they reduce complex relational ideas to one or another of the terms in the relation over which they range, dealing with the other terms implicitly while seeming not to deal with them at all" (ibid. 51, 67).

⁸⁹ Although it must be noted that no direct answer to this interesting question is given. As it happens, much more comprehensive account of essential contestability as socially determined phenomenon must be first provided.

⁹⁰ Ian Shapiro's findings are based on the notion put forward by Gerald C. MacCallum, Jr. in his article "Negative and Positive Freedom" (MacCallum 1972): "As MacCallum showed long ago, any assertion about freedom or autonomy minimally involves reference to agents, restraining (or enabling) conditions, and action... His aim was to shift discussion away from conceptual debates about the meaning of the term "freedom," by showing that most debates that seem to be about it are really about the substantive variables in his triad. The triad itself is empty" (Shapiro 1989: 52). Shapiro offers many examples of the failures of liberal thinkers to account for 'justice' and 'freedom' in terms of what he has dubbed as "gross concepts". I recommend everyone interested in the matter to read his excellent article "Gross Concepts in Political Argument". Another work, in which he expounds his notions concerning the issue of contestability (of complete theories, even essentially so) is *The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory: An Essay in Critical Theory* (1986: 290–301) in which he seems to hover between a notion of essential contestability (based on certain methodological problems relating to causal explanation in social sciences) and a certain type of imperfection conception i.e. there are certain restrictions in human understanding concerning the capacity to consider all relevant data or that the facts are ideologically colored to such extent that no general understanding is attainable. Note, however, that Robert Grafstein seems to base some of his views about the essential contestability of the concept 'freedom' also on the considerations of MacCallum (cf. Grafstein 1988: 21). Then again, he is picturing essential contestability that has "a realist foundation": "From my perspective, essentiality involves a very broad empirical claim concerning how and that politics will take place and concerning how and that theorists will be provoked to categorize the world in different ways" (ibid. 24).

To begin with, it must be noted that one should not jump to conclusion that Shapiro is a supporter of essential contestability⁹¹. Rather, his point is to argue that the theoretical perspective usually taken on socio-political issues clouds real questions from sight since theoretical debates boil down to be about correct definitions of concepts and their meanings thereof. The political theorists (this holds to the supporters of essential contestability thesis as well) are in fact, according to him, too quick of accepting the gross concepts—the concepts we are dealing with when substantive disagreements about one or another of the terms in a relational argument are reduced to disagreements about the meanings of the terms themselves—“making a self-fulfilling prophecy out of the “essential contestability” thesis” (ibid. 67–8).

Indeed, it seems that there is some sort of mix-up evident in a thinking making no difference between a term’s meaning as its use and criteria for the correct application of a term. Shapiro remarks correctly that many if not most concepts typical to political discourse make sense only in certain circumstances. For example, ‘justice’ interpreted as redistribution of goods pertains only in the circumstances where resources are scarce and limited. From this point of view it seems to be legitimate to think that one cannot give a plausible, or even sensible, description of the sort of concepts without explicit or implicit reference to certain set of social particulars. Above, Care’s conception of the primitive level of identification of social particulars as “logically prior to the level on which the arguments, debates, and conflicts of participants are a main factor” (Care 1973: 18) seems not only to offer a much needed stability to the debates (providing a set of social particulars by which to apply basic social concepts) but there is also reason to believe that we cannot hope to reach the meaning of socio-political concepts without certain set of social particulars in place. Since those particulars are contingent and could conceivably be otherwise they are easily “bracketed” in search for certainty. But if the plausible meaning of the socio-political concept (or term) is not attainable without referring to certain set of social particulars, it is easy to see why essential contestability thesis focusing on (“gross”) concepts becomes “a self-fulfilling prophecy”. This is another nail in the coffin of seeing the phenomenon of essential contestability as caused by linguistically autonomous nature of concepts. Actually, one could still refer to the gross concepts as “essentially contestable” but after the realization that the essentiality of conceptual contestation is one’s

⁹¹ Although, as stated earlier in section 2.6, he considers it possible that there actually could be some essentially contested concepts even if their number is probably quite limited. After reading his account of ‘gross concepts’ I am curious how he would characterize them (which he does not).

own doing and based on a mere misdescription, it seems more of a pseudo-problem if anything⁹².

Thus, Shapiro sees the matter of gross concepts not sufficiently tied to empirical questions leading to “surface oppositions” that systematically misdescribe what is really going on⁹³ (ibid. 65). If that is really the case, the whole field of social sciences should engage in serious self-reflection. Alas, as this is mostly “a concern”, although quite reasonable, it can be proven to be on the mark only in relation to specific theories supposedly committing this mistake. Let just say (in the skeptical spirit of Wittgenstein) that there might be some basis to it. Nonetheless, if we assume the rather commonsensical conjecture that “any claim about how politics is to be organized must be a relational claim involving agents, actions, legitimacy, and ends” (ibid. 51) and another that issues essentially contested can be loosely characterized in form of claims about how politics is to be organized, we can be even more convinced with our current course of seeing the essential contestability as socially determined. I am not necessarily saying that these things could not be accounted for while focusing on the nature of concepts and criteria they consist of (including the criteria of application) but the emphasis on agents and their ends in complex social relations has the advantage of being able to conceive the matter from the first person perspective. Instead of “asking” from the concepts “what makes you contested/contestable?” we can ask from the person “why do you actually contest the issue?”

In the end, both Care and Shapiro urge one to keep the feet on the ground⁹⁴ and to think twice about what is actually contested and what is not although their point of view to the issue is considerably different. Care remarks that one of his aims is “to prevent the exaggeration or inflation of the thesis of essential contestability” (Care 1973: 15) while Shapiro states that there are theories which are grounded on “natural law and virtue”, for example, “to be invoked in behalf of every substantive political position. We should be arguing about the feasibility and desirability of those positions” (Shapiro 1989: 67). These

⁹² Of course, one could characterize the situation in terms of incompleteness of this kind of concepts which would be essential incompleteness if it could be shown that one cannot avoid reducing references to social particulars to be about a meaning of a concept in the specific way deemed faulty by Shapiro. Unfortunately, it is not possible to examine the matter of incompleteness within the limits of this study.

⁹³ Those constructing theses of essential contestability take this surface disagreement as a sign of remarkably deep contestation, according to Shapiro (Shapiro 1989: 67–8)

⁹⁴ Robert Grafstein contends that essential contestability with a realist foundation leads to this sort of conclusion as well: “The relatively arcane point that realism and essential contestability are connected may, paradoxically, represent a small first step toward a more down to earth position in political philosophy” (Grafstein 1988: 26).

are urgings everyone in social sciences should heed, I think. Generally speaking, nothing coerces us to hold a view that there is no single correct answer to elusive questions regarding the matters of political and moral nature. If it is to be shown, that (conclusive) rational resolutions convincing the participants of these pervasive debates are not only logically possible but humanly likely, we can assert that essential contestability is only applicable to situations of actual empirical contestation which can perhaps be resolved by increased knowledge—diminishing the essentiality of it completely⁹⁵. But I wouldn't hold my breath waiting.

2.9 Remarks

Despite the clear problems related to locating the source of essential contestability within the concept itself, let's take a brief look on all seven conditions laid out by Gallie⁹⁶. The first condition, appraisive character of a concept, was found to be rather unambiguous, although the possibility of ascribing negative valuation to something or someone must also be taken into account. Furthermore, I hinted briefly to the intimate relation between appraisal and description of situation. This in turn suggests that, rather than concentrating our attention solely on “universal” characteristics of concepts, we need to take a closer look on a subjective perspective of an individual and its relation to a normative component supposedly found in a concept. In section 2.7 I examined the arguments presented by John Gray according to which norm-dependency cannot be seen as the viable source for essential contestability. Although it is evident that we are dealing with normativity in this matter, it is rather easy to join Gray in his conclusion for the reasons presented earlier,

⁹⁵ Kristján Kristjánsson (1995) holds the view that with the “the method of patient critical clarification, or conceptual revision, within the framework of an open-texture model“. According to him, “(I)t yields non-relative definitions of moral concepts, while simultaneously explaining the continued possibility of a non-essential conceptual disagreement which rests on the incompleteness of empirical data” (Kristjánsson 1995: 83). As we can clearly see, his point of view is in direct contradiction with Shapiro's. There are lots of controversial assumptions behind Kristjánsson's conception which cannot be discussed here. One relevant to our discussion in chapter 3 is a rather sensible assumption that moral concepts are described from a moral/normative point of view which renders these concepts to have certain and, in principle, definable point. From this, Kristjánsson seems to more or less straightforwardly assume that this point is common to all uses of the concept in question rendering it non-relational. I cannot agree with him on this. If the moral point of the concept turns out to be relational it makes the concept itself relational as well as far as we are concerned with the empirical investigation providing clear answers. More detailed criticism will be covered in further works (cf. Pennanen 2012).

⁹⁶ For the sake of clarity, I still refer to concepts Gallie is talking about as “essentially contested”. Generally, these remarks are meant to serve as a somewhat helpful summary of considerations and reasons presented throughout the chapter for the need to revision Gallie's thesis. For the specific arguments and insights one needs to consult the section in which the topic was discussed.

namely the difficulties in assuming the incommensurability of values in the context of essentially *contestable* concepts.

The second condition, internal complexity, was seen as “causing” the third condition, diverse descriptibility—although the openness of concepts, a characteristic not exclusive to the concepts of social sciences alone, can arguably be seen as providing the foundation for both conditions. For an essentially contested concept to be internally complex means roughly that the concept consists of various, often overlapping criteria. These criteria can be put in ranking order according to one’s take (person appraising a set of criteria) on the issue at hand making the concept diversely describable initially. According to my interpretation the term ‘initially’ refers to the situation in which no one has yet appraised the concept in question, in a practically impossible but conceptually conceivable “initial state” or “original position” of sort. In practice, a person has committed herself to a single somewhat coherent conception of a concept, although different conceptions may conflict with each other. With the notion of ‘practical closure’ by Norman S. Care and with the idea of an indefinite set of (contingent) social particulars serving as a general understanding providing a frame we can more easily conceive the fact that no definition or redefinition of a concept happen in a vacuum. As far as stability provided by some generally acknowledged social particulars (examined in section 2.8) is concerned, this notion may prove to be a double-edged sword in practice, at least if one hopes to arrive at clear and uncontroversial definitions of social concepts. The general understanding of social particulars is a presumption, if anything, which can be contested in turn. This adds a complication to the issue but it is the complication we should embrace according to Ian Shapiro in order to avoid misdescribing the phenomena of interest, and I heartily agree with him. As we have seen, formulating a concept as consisting of several possibly overlapping criteria does not really help to track the intractable nature of pervasive disputes. Nonetheless, these two criteria are rather widely accepted as valid as they reflect the common assumption of “the fact of pluralism” (in values, when coupled with the first condition) which is nowadays viewed as pretty much given starting point, in itself a nice indication of the concreteness of the general understanding about some social particulars.

The fourth condition, openness, demands that in the light of changing circumstances the accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits considerable modification. If we interpret this condition as a stipulative statement it pretty much guarantees the basic idea of essential contestability as founded on some sort of inescapable

value pluralism but—as, in my opinion, is the case with all the other conditions—I view it as a substantive statement describing an actual state of affairs in socio-political matters. The condition of openness has been generally viewed in relation to the difference between natural and human sciences. This demarcation may be misleading as was illustrated by Gray with the comparison between ‘empirical concepts’ in relation to verification criteria available to us. It can also be concluded, as was claimed by Care, that practical closures in conceptual matters are indeed possible in social sciences as well⁹⁷. If there is indeed no special sense in which concepts in social sciences are ‘open’ (compared to all other concepts) the rather deeply felt intuition we have about the difference between human and natural sciences in this context points towards a way to evaluate rival ways of using these concepts instead of there being a special property of certain group of concepts, namely, the openness. In section 2.7 it was concluded with the help of John Gray that ‘openness’ cannot be seen as the source of essential contestability rendering the socio-political concepts as essentially *contestable*.

The fifth condition, reciprocal recognition, is the first direct reference outside the features of concepts made by Gallie. If contestant parties would indeed view the disputes as being concerned with special group of concepts (or issues) recognizing rival uses as of permanent potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept, that would, in practice, transform the hypothesis about there being essential contestability about certain concepts into a social fact accepted, acknowledged and recognized by all participants in debates. During our previous discussion it has been vehemently asserted that to speak about a contestation as a definitional dispute in any meaningful sense there must be some common ground that is shared, and some points that are contested, for there even being a possibility for a genuine argument. I find it somewhat remarkable that those who have commented over the years on this issue have not considered the possibility that the condition of reciprocal recognition can in itself serve as much needed common ground providing also a motivation to have any dispute at all. However, to interpret this condition as providing the needed “building blocks” we must assume that Gallie is advocating rather comprehensive ethical view which doesn’t necessarily fit at all with the basic idea of essential contestability the particular conception of it being “just one appraisal among many”. I see it possible to reframe Gallie’s theory in a way that it would actually describe a

⁹⁷ According to my reading of Gallie he wouldn’t have been opposed to this although he failed to cover it. This is one of the reasons why he should have used the term ‘contestable’ instead of ‘contested’. We should recall the first type of contestability, “contestedness”—which indeed is not an interesting enough to warrant our attention or the prefix ‘essential’—identified by Gray in section 2.7.

certain line of progress towards “the pluralistic understanding” but that would be something tremendously different than what was intended by him.

There is also a certain danger evident in the particular way of interpreting the condition of reciprocal recognition, namely that it would require parties of a dispute to identify a concept they are disputing as ‘essentially contested’ in a first order sense. That would practically mean that the new identification would replace the older. Still, I claim that the disputants could view the controversial concept as ‘essentially contested’ in another sense with the qualification that the source of essential contestability must be located outside the particular characteristics of these concepts—recall the distinction between linguistic autonomy and social determination explicated by Barry Clarke in section 2.7. That way it would not infringe, if my argument is correct, the original conceptions of a first order sense in a damaging way. To what extent this would affect the dispute in question, however, is still an open matter. At this point, I have to also make another perhaps needless qualification. The formulation of this condition must be such that its acceptance does not automatically qualify as the acceptance of the whole thesis of essential contestability; to mutually identify a concept as ‘essentially contested’ cannot in this sense mean that one subscribes without a question to all characteristics of a particular thesis of essential contestability. That goes to say that the character of the acknowledgment is substantive (and thus to a degree), not formal.

The sixth condition, original exemplar, is arguably the most obscure one. At the first glance it looks more than reasonable, we indeed can conceive the many ways authoritative examples (especially concerning intellectual traditions) direct us, as well as provides us with already normatively justified conceptual tools. Ironically, the most forceful criticism against this notion does not come from “natural adversaries”, i.e. objectivists, but from those committed to a notion of essential contestability and to the theoretical framework it presupposes. If we conceive our interpretations of concepts as being essentially contestable in principle, and therefore not being fixed in any final sense, how can we assume that the examples we consider authoritative, the exemplars, fare any better? Surely, one can make a commonsensical assumption that it is a matter of degree rather than matter of absolute status for one conception of a concept being perceived as ‘the exemplar’, but the question of identifying it still demands an answer. I assume that—if a plausible answer is to be found—it is closely tied to earlier issues of ‘superiority’ and ‘temporal closure’. Thus, the status of exemplars must be clarified thoroughly to not open the thesis to the charge of essentialism (which would completely betray the original idea).

This condition, in general, seems to point outside the certain properties of essentially contested concepts as the source of essential contestability.

The seventh and final condition, progressive competition, is closely tied to previous conditions of reciprocal recognition and original exemplar. If we assume that the condition of reciprocal recognition is a statement of possible social situation approximating a social fact, the progressive competition is its natural result. However, not even Gallie sees his own framework as leading to the progressive competition so straightforwardly since he ties it to the achievement of the original exemplar, and to its optimum development, as was discussed in section 2.6. As I see it, the notion of progressive development, in a sense originally meant by Gallie, stands or falls with the original exemplar. Despite the complexities confronted in any attempt to frame any measures as leading to (progressive) development, there might be few options available for one wishing to work on a reasonable account of essential contestability⁹⁸. This is yet another condition pointing towards the explanation of essential contestability as socially determined which makes it—together with conditions (V) and (VI)—sort of residual when the matter is viewed from the perspective of linguistic autonomy.

Perhaps the most severe difficulty in analyzing Gallie's original idea of essentially contested concepts lies in his insistence to frame all seven conditions as aspects of a concept or, of a certain group of concepts. This forces him to rather obscure phrasings in which expressions like “the accredited achievement is *initially* variously describable” or “enables the original exemplar's achievement to be sustained and/or developed” seem to confuse the subject rather than to clarify it. Coupled with Gallie's obvious effort to avoid grounding the theory on some metaphysical foundation the very same concepts acquire the status of constituting (at least seemingly) the social reality in somewhat questionable manner. John Gray notes that many social and political concepts used “are characterized, first of all, by a peculiar sort of reflexivity. This is to say that judgements about what comes into the domain of the political are themselves political” (Gray 1978: 393). Even though this reflexivity concerns the notion of essentially contested concepts as well, Gallie does not account for it. I don't mean to imply that Gallie's theory is flawed because it necessarily is a part of its research. What must be considered as a serious omission, however, is a lack of consideration for the proper role of *persons* using the concepts, and how that affects a process of meaning formation of those concepts.

⁹⁸ One such conception is briefly discussed in section 3.4 but this issue mostly left unresolved. It will be discussed in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012).

Are the concepts Gallie is interested in essentially *contested* (in the proper use of the term)? That remains ultimately unclear; what has become evident during the examination in section 2.7 is that we should not, at least, think that they are essentially *contestable*. I took under scrutiny the general claim according to which Gallie's theory leads to undesirable conceptual relativism. It looks to do so from the perspective of linguistic autonomy, which is a kind of last nail to Gallie's proverbial coffin, since he tries to find an explanation of the phenomenon that does not rest on "metaphysical afflictions". I also asserted *pace* Care that the thesis of essential contestability should not be inflated to beg the question of objectivity. Partly because of that, at the crux of any conception approximating the basic idea of essential contestability intended by Gallie has to be a plausible account of how people can conceive one conception as superior compared to some other alternative⁹⁹ or, at the very least, a minimal assumption that one can meaningfully hold any conception at all given the lack of correct answers in once-and-for-all-sense. Without a notion of 'superiority' the conversion from one belief to another is rendered unintelligible, even haphazard; one needs at least *some* reasons.

Anyone trying to develop Gallie's notion has three outstanding challenges to solve. First of all, one must frame the theory in a way that any essentially contested concept has to be a distinct concept, not a confused one. Conditions (VI) and (VII) serve this purpose rather inadequately. But if the achievement of the original exemplar can be "seen in a different light" i.e. appraised differently depending on an interpreter it complicates the process of distinguishing an essentially contested concept from a simply confused one. This kind of theoretical move would also shift the primary focus from a concept to an interpreter appraising the concept. Since Gallie clearly tries to argue that there actually is a distinct group of concepts he hesitates to do that. While I admire Gallie's effort to keep the framework and vocabulary of his theory simply at the level of concepts

⁹⁹ This has been a matter of some controversy for various commentators of Gallie's original thesis. The response of Steven Lukes to K.I.MacDonald illustrates this nicely: "I altogether fail to see how my failure to draw Macdonald's proposed distinction renders me vulnerable to the charge of holding two incompatible positions: (i) that the concept of power is essentially contested and (2) that the three-dimensional conception is superior to the others. It is not inconsistent to claim that one of a number of contending perspectives allows one to see further and deeper than others, and to produce arguments and illustrations to support that claim" (Lukes 1977: 419). One can agree with Lukes regarding this point (as does Robert Grafstein, see: Grafstein 1988). Maybe the reason behind the claims of incompatibility stem from the failure to see the latitude on which Lukes, for example, operates. The bipolar nature of concepts such as subjective/objective and particular/universal is likely to be in the root of the problem. In this respect, Ernesto Laclau's contribution to the matter might be illuminating. To put the matter roughly, he sees the universal as emerging out of the particular, "not as some principle underlying and explaining the particular", rather "the universal is the symbol of missing fullness and the particular exists only in the contradictory movement of asserting at the same time a differential identity and cancelling it through its subsumption in a nondifferential medium" (Laclau 1995: 101).

this is something that one needs to do in order to form a more realistic model of phenomenon in question.

Secondly, if a concept is deemed as an *essentially* contested concept—provoking ever more interpretations about its correct use—how can we say anything at all about it? Even if we don't have objective standards of such a kind that we could define the concept once-and-for-all, we have to have *some* standards of evaluation so that we can make sense of the concept at all. When taken literally, Gallie's chosen vocabulary implicates the concept being so deeply linked to the exemplar that the standard of evaluation is found in the use of concept itself. Gallie's Wittgensteinian roots are well above the ground to be seen here. However, one has an avenue available for clarifying the issue and for finding sufficient standards of evaluation. That would involve bringing up a historical and social perspective which would move the focus outside the language (thought as consisting of system of concepts with special features) yet again.

The third challenge that confronts the seeker of deeper understanding is a plausibility of an account according to which it is reasonable to continue a debate that is, in principle, unresolvable in a sense defined earlier. Even if we admit a possibility of a temporal closure it is not enough to make these disputes reasonable (or "pointful"). The significance of Gallie's theory approaches a zero if it is deemed to be an account about pointless debates that are unresolvable¹⁰⁰. In order to make sense of the reasonability of continued contestation one must first take under scrutiny a possibility of reasonable conversion on a level of particular individuals. Luckily, the idea of conversion from one view to another concerning socio-political and moral matters is intuitively appealing since we can presumably perceive it in our everyday life. The biggest problem pertaining to this issue is to evaluate whether it is reasonable to think that the conversion is plausible even in the face of realizing that one cannot justify one's convictions as correct, in a strict sense.

Now that various problematics of Gallie's original theory are identified along with some more general pitfalls any supporter of essential contestability thesis may fall into, it is time to develop the notion further. In the next chapter, I will specifically try to answer the question "is it plausible to see the conversion from one conception to another as a rational and meaningful move when faced with the uncertainty of definitive resolution to these disputes implicated by the thesis of essential contestability?" As I see the issue, it is

¹⁰⁰ Those criticizing plausibility of continued contestation if the contest itself is unresolvable can, thus, along with a sensible assumption that the substance of these disputes is moral and/or political, make a conjecture that the theory of essentially contested concepts leads to nihilism and radical moral relativism.

necessary to incorporate a conception of rationality into the thesis in order to make sense of the assumed superiority of one conception over another. I do not attempt to produce a reductive mechanism for tracking the conversion of views, however, but rather to provide a heuristic standpoint for its evaluation.

3. ANOTHER INTERPRETATION OF THE ESSENTIAL CONTESTABILITY

In this chapter I attempt to look into the phenomenon of essential contestability from another angle. It is no longer assumed that the best way to go about is to concentrate on the issue solely at the level of concepts and their central characteristics; the perspective is now shifted to actual persons involved in disputes. The change of scenery is necessary, I argue, to better capture the nature of the phenomenon in question. But there is another assumption guiding this choice as well, one that began to take form during the course of the previous chapter: the elucidation of the thesis of essential contestability by focusing on the concepts alone does not seem to be a promising avenue for developing the conception further as one encounters too often various sorts of incommensurabilities and bipolarities standing in the way of a more plausible thesis. Hopefully this widening of the perspective does not muddle up the issue unnecessarily.

The objective of this chapter is to answer the question “is it plausible to see the conversion from one conception (of essentially contested concept) to another as a rational and meaningful move when faced with the uncertainty of definitive resolution to these disputes implicated by the thesis of essential contestability?” If one can answer affirmatively to this question, it has wide reaching consequences for the thesis offering also a point of view from which the scope and character of a plausible conception about ‘essential contestability’¹⁰¹ can be assessed. In order to reach a viable account of the rationality of conversion from one view to another, the standard of evaluation must be provided that is not in itself contested in the precisely exact manner the conceptions (about essentially contested concepts) are contested in the course of disputes. This means that certain analytical distinctions are to be made.

In the first section of the chapter I will focus on the appraisive nature of political and social concepts stemming from the moral point of view providing a rationale for grouping certain criteria together under a rubric of a concept. Behind any conceptual usage there is a point behind a use to be found although it remains rather vague more often than not. A concept of ‘normative frameworks’ is employed to clarify the issue leading naturally to actual persons and their identities in relation to various interpretations of social

¹⁰¹ From now on the phenomenon of essential contestability is referred simply as “essential contestability”. When a theory concerning that phenomenon is under an investigation, it is referred to as “a thesis of essential contestability” which is distinguished from Gallie’s original conception—from this point onward referred as “the original thesis of essential contestability”, “Gallie’s original theory” etc.

phenomena. This insertion of a new theoretical concept takes us beyond the bounds of Gallie's original theory, the move which may lead to another impasse, as was shown by John Gray in section 2.7, unless the problem of incommensurability is tackled sufficiently. This section stands also as "the bridge" to the wider perspective needed which connects the conceptual issue of essential contestability to the substantive matter of forms of life. A couple of concerns left previously unanswered (the reflexivity of judgments, elucidation of the role of social particulars, and the contestation emerging out of claims of insensitivity) are discussed from the new perspective as well. The most central claim presented in this section is the hypothesis according to which we encounter essential contestability when the issues and concepts contested are related to the definitions of the boundaries of respective forms of life.

After the extension of the theoretical perspective undertaken in the first section, the substantive matter of what is at stake in the pervasive socio-political debates must be illustrated more succinctly. In section 3.2, I will argue that the primary motivating factor behind the need to have these, at least seemingly, endless debates is the attempt to maintain the unity and stability of one's identity. It must be pointed out, that I do not aspire to explain moral and political motivations in any reductive sense, the point is rather to sketch an outline for the theoretical perspective from which actions and interpretations of individuals can be seen as reasonable responses in the circumstances of essential contestability. This in itself does not prove any thesis of essential contestability to be a correct characterization of the relevant aspects of the phenomenon dubbed as 'essential contestability'.

Section 3.3 is dedicated for the attempt to provide an account of rationality suitable to a thesis of essential contestability. The specific task set is to illustrate how a conversion from one view to another, at a personal level, can be seen as rational and meaningful although no definite justifications for one view or another are attainable. For this purpose I propose a conception of transitional rationality provided by Charles Taylor. I must emphasize the fact that the conception of rationality thus produced is itself contestable, and perhaps even controversial, although I personally see it as a plausible account that goes quite well with the current mainstream views about human psychology¹⁰².

¹⁰² It must be noted that the conception of rationality in question is not justified by referring to psychological studies. What is alluded here is the point of view of the most general kind according to which human persons are dynamic beings who are engaged in constantly ordering their cognitive schemas to fit the outside reality.

Section 3.4 continues with the theme of rationality, now widening the perspective even more to ‘traditions’, specifically. With the help of Alasdair MacIntyre it is argued that the incommensurability of different normative frameworks is not a grievous problem even in the case of broader intellectual traditions. The key feature of the notion advocated by me in this section is ‘translatability’ of one language, or one normative framework, to another. Rather than seeing the translation as a problem to be circumvented, it is seen as a possibility and, indeed, central to any plausible notion that tries to tackle human condition seriously. Although we can assess the rationality of arguments embedded in traditions only comparatively, it is not the case that we should throw our hands up in the face of the march of stark relativism.

Generally speaking, two main arguments need to be made in this chapter. 1) It must be shown with some plausibility or probability that there is nothing deeply problematic with the notion of a person involved in a pervasive debate in which no knock-down arguments can be presented for any single conception. Despite the absence of once-and-for-all justifications the persons involved in these debates are justified—from their own point of view—to change their opinions and convictions making the conversion from one view to another intelligible, reasonable and rational. 2) The claim that human understanding is socially and historically bounded must be given some light. As a parallel to a process of single individuals finding their place in the social world historical traditions and mentalities reflect the self-understanding of historically situated societies including inhabitants of such societies. It is argued that the rationality perceived in different traditions is best seen as constituted (in a loose way) by the same traditions in which the very rationality is realized.

After the arguments above are established it must be assessed whether the overall perspective commits one to a form of relativism that is best avoided.

3.1 Normative point of view from another perspective

We began the examination of Gallie’s original theory with the evaluation of the first condition, appraisive character, by stating that the essentially contested concept is “*appraisive* in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement” (Gallie 1956a: 171). In this section, a point of view from which socio-political concepts and related social phenomena are appraised is viewed from another angle, namely from a perspective of actual persons involved in disputes. To group certain set of criteria under the

rubric of the concept is to make an evaluation from a certain perspective. Even if it would seem from a third person perspective, that the criteria for one concept or another are “open to choice”, a matter of choosing them cannot plausibly be viewed as a matter of being able to detach oneself from that which has been chosen i.e. we should avoid the temptation of positing a socially disembodied agent for whom the task at hand is a simple matter of scaling the respective relevancy of the criteria in relation to the concept substantively defined by the same set of criteria. The scale is always tilted one way or another. To make sense of the implications of such a tilting, we need to introduce the notion of *normative frameworks*.

‘Normative frameworks’ is, for the present purpose, defined as the framework guiding the value-evaluations; the certain stance that is consciously or unconsciously (with due reflection or without) taken in various situations demanding one to take the stance. Since we are especially interested in disputes in the present study, it is pertinent to note that the things that “demand one to take stance” are not limited to situations in which someone actually is asking or pressing someone else for a definitive answer to some question or problem. William Connolly states that...

"To describe a situation is not to name something, but to characterize it... A description does not refer to data or elements that are bound together merely on the basis of similarities adhering in them, *but to describe is to characterize a situation from the vantage point of certain interests, purposes, or standards...* To describe is to characterize from one or more possible points of view, and the concepts with which we so characterize have the contours they do in part because of the point of view from which they are formed" (Connolly 1993: 22–3).

Regarding the quote above, what Connolly sees as “the vantage point of certain interests, purposes, or standards” I refer to as ‘normative frameworks’. There are a couple of points of convergence with Gallie’s theory in the quote by Connolly that merit one’s attention. First of all, to state that “to describe is to characterize from one or more possible points of view” is to practically repeat the insight of Gallie’s third condition: “the accredited achievement is initially variously describable” (Gallie 1956a: 172). Secondly, to assert that the concepts “have the contours they do in part because of the point of view from which they are formed” is to subscribe to Gallie’s first condition, appraisive character, but from another perspective. Both Gallie and Connolly describe the situation from a third person perspective—although Gallie’s focus is on concepts while Connolly is mostly concerned with the normative perspective the conceptions of concepts are formed

from—that way ‘diverse describability’ must be interpreted rather as a multiplicity of possible conceptions (clashing) than as evidence of inherent complexity in this respect¹⁰³. The third person perspective is worth emphasizing at this point since I consider the conceptions of normative frameworks and transitional rationality from a first person perspective in the following sections of the current chapter¹⁰⁴.

There are no “blindness” in the normative frameworks which are taken off only in situations requiring reflection which goes to say that we are engaged in evaluating our social surroundings all the time—although the degree of (self-)reflection may vary depending on the person. Despite the continuity of the process of evaluating one’s surroundings according one’s normative frameworks—and, indeed, perhaps due to that very fact—the first stage of taking a stance to any social issue arrives in a form of question “should I take the stance concerning this issue at all?” This is indeed, the first point that can be contested in relation to any socio-political issue which is especially keenly shown in political debates involving modal concepts like ‘public’ and ‘private’ which have the function of being “watershed concepts” more often than not, meaning that they mark the normative limits of a discussion or dispute to begin with. Of course, the concepts in themselves mark no “natural” limits or viable boundaries within which a debate can flourish; the certain boundary set is always a matter of interpretation. There are three points that must be taken into account regarding the issue: reflexivity, social particulars and social (in)sensitivity/awareness.

To start with, let us consider the matter of “watershed” quality of some concepts and their aptitude to cause contestations over the lines distinguished. John Gray observes insightfully that...

¹⁰³ In section 2.2 I grouped together the conditions (II) and (III), internal complexity and diverse describability, since in the case of singular concepts it seemed that the latter is derived from the former. When the perspective is shifted to persons and to their normative frameworks, more nuanced separation is in order. At this point, it must be clarified that despite the fact Connolly clearly seems to think that although diverse describability is seen as a result of possible points of views on the matter, he still puts an emphasis on the internal complexity of concepts with his notion of ‘cluster concepts’ discussed earlier. Thus, the relation between the two notions (internal complexity and diverse describability) is not as straightforward in Connolly’s theory as it is with Gallie’s.

¹⁰⁴ In my opinion Connolly is characterizing the issue at hand in a second order sense. This is clear when contrasted to his discussion of the concept of ‘responsibility’ and a possibility of it serving as a basis for more comprehensive account of normativity of politics (in current society) due to the fact that it is so widely shared. In that case, Connolly is evidently talking about shared similarities in a first order sense. (Connolly 1993.) In proposing a conception of rationality that can serve to explain the conversion from one view to another when seen from a first person perspective, the conception of rationality thus proposed must necessarily be a conception in a first order sense.

“Whereas, for a form of social life to exist at all, certain concepts delimiting the economic from the sacred, or areas of morality from areas of prudence or aesthetics, must be treated as uncontested, it is precisely because contestability can break out in respect of some of these basic boundary concepts that concepts designating specific social objects and practices tend to become contested” (Gray 1978: 394)¹⁰⁵

The issue of reflexivity concerning the concepts such as ‘politics’ has already been touched upon in sections 2.7 and 2.9. We are now in a position in which the notion must be tackled in relation to essential contestability. Gray is right to point out that, in order to exist at all, a form of life must employ certain concepts that can provide contours to that specific form of life separating it from other possible forms. However, due to the fact that these forms of life thus distinguished must be intelligible both to the persons embracing them and to the persons seen as others (from that particular point of view), certain concepts intelligible to both (participants in a form of life and “others”) and used in a language common to both, a relatively unsatisfying result in regards to clarity is that those embracing other forms of life, usually, make use of the very same concepts. Regarding the famous phrase by Wittgenstein, there is no such a thing as a private language¹⁰⁶. It is no coincidence that Gallie didn’t consider the case of negative normative valence originally; I claim that he had something akin to this notion in mind although he framed the issue analytically on the level of concepts. Although we could imagine cases where persons would employ concepts of negative normative valence in order to delineate the crucial contours of their respective forms of life, we can hardly consider them to be the most typical cases.

¹⁰⁵ Consider also the following: “What boundary concepts have in common with concepts to do with specific aspects of social life is that in each case a judgement that such-and-such a practice has a political character, or that such-and-such a relationship counts as a marriage, is partly constitutive of the subject-matter of the judgement. That judgements of this sort are made at all enters into their truth conditions in a way which does not hold for judgements in the natural sciences” (Gray 1978: 394). I use ‘watershed concept’ in similar way to Gray’s ‘boundary concept’. The reason for this terminological difference lies in the fact that I want to reserve the use of ‘boundary concept’ to phenomenological concepts such as ‘consciousness’ and its cognates.

¹⁰⁶ The necessity of this can be illustrated with the following heuristic: Let us suppose that there is a person A who has, through some kind of revelation, become committed to a form of life X. Then, let us assume that the rest of the population is committed to a form of life Y. In order to conceive X as separate from Y, A must have some idea how X can be distinguished from Y in order to perceive her own chosen form of life as different, and this can be done only in relation to Y which is defined in certain language (as is X, for that matter). For there to be a difference at all, there must be a relation and a medium through which that difference can be articulated. This is ever more evident in the case in which A tries to convince another person B of the benefits of her chosen form of life. Even if we would assume that the languages of X and Y are widely different the difference between them must translated through a common terminology or a language. It must be intelligible in a broad sense.

Quentin Skinner (1989) notes that “one type of argument over appraisive terms centres on the criteria for applying them. Now this is certainly a substantive social debate as well as a linguistic one¹⁰⁷. For it can equally well be characterized as an argument between two rival social theories and their attendant methods of classifying social reality” (Skinner 1989: 11). He uses ‘art’ as an example of a concept which “gains its meaning from the place it occupies within an entire conceptual scheme... an argument over the application of the term *art* is potentially nothing less than an argument over two rival (though not of course incommensurable) ways of approaching and dividing up a large tract of our cultural experience” (ibid. 13). Indeed, when we consider Skinner’s example of ‘art’ it is easy to see its status as the ‘watershed concept’ in a sense illustrated above by Gray¹⁰⁸. I take this to be the primary sense in which essentially contested concepts yield such heated controversy that seems to reach to the core. Since the contestation is *essentially* about various ways of approaching and interpreting cultural experience there seems to be no easy avenue for someone wishing to pinpoint where the possible confusion really lies¹⁰⁹. Given the complexity of the issue it is probable that even in the case in which disputants agree on certain standards of rationality to guide them in clearing the issue it is more than likely that there are inconsistencies and confusions to be found in all particular

¹⁰⁷ The same point is made by Gray: “Instead, we must recognize that intractable controversy about such terms as ‘freedom’, ‘justice’, ‘power’ and ‘democracy’ expresses disagreement that is at once conceptual and substantive” (Gray 1978: 391).

¹⁰⁸ By a curious happenstance that is not completely accidental, Gallie sees ‘art’ as ‘essentially contested concept’ (1956b).

¹⁰⁹ The problem of pinpointing a possible confusion is rather difficult when the matter is seeing in relation to forms of life. That is because in many actual cases a conceptual dispute can be arguably characterized both as a confusion about a concept and as a contestation about the very essence of a form of life. For instance, in 2010 there was a heated public discussion in Finland going on about whether gays should be able to get married (see Gray’s quote in fn.105). First of all, it was evident that different parties to the discussion—which didn’t actually fall in line based on religion alone, mind you—offered clearly different senses to the term ‘marriage’ and failed to see the arguments of others in any way reasonable at least partly due to the fact that they continued to talk past each other. In an interesting twist, Päivi Räsänen, the party leader of Christian Democrats, commented on a tv-show that, from the point of view offered by the Bible, “being gay is considered a sin”. That comment caused a lot of outrage, naturally, because people were offended by the implications of the term ‘sin’; many viewed it as a moral condemnation of gays as persons, as if their full status as moral persons respectable in their own right was now taken away, or denied, by someone in a public position. This example is interesting because the term ‘sin’ was interpreted and translated in a language of secular public morality as signifying something like “morally outrageous” which was then hotly contested. Different forms of life clashed against each other contesting the justifications of the boundaries of respective forms of life—due to power relations “the Christian side” was mainly on defense—but few people thought the dispute as a confusion about the concept ‘sin’. It could have been easily argued, if wanted, that the situation in question is a typical case of two sides talking past each other (though in this case, that was not very likely) in which the meanings of ‘sin’ and ‘sinner’ are widely different depending on a person using them in a certain context. According to the Christian Bible, all people are ‘sinners’ (and the Christ died for those sins). Should all people be offended? My point here is not to take a side, but to conclude that it is likely that there are likely a lot of social conflicts that are much harder to analyze in this respect than this particular example.

ways of approaching the issue i.e. in the attempts to divide and classify cultural experience. Broadly speaking this sort of concepts at the crux of arguments uphold complete social philosophies of individuals directing the very sense of their being in social world.

The second point we need to take into account concerns ‘social particulars’, the notion by Norman S. Care, which was complemented with the help of Ian Shapiro, illustrated in section 2.8. To see the issue of essential contestability from the view point of normative frameworks tightly related to the forms of life is to conceive the matter as linguistic/conceptual and substantive at the same time. Concerning the substantive moorings of any debate about socio-political issues in which certain concepts are contested because the contours of a given form of life are, in a sense, constituted by certain understanding or interpretation about those concepts, it must be taken into account that the contestation or dispute does not happen in a vacuum in which conceptions advocated by those subscribing to different forms of life are in conflict. It is very likely that disputants share a general understanding concerning certain social particulars at least to some degree. For instance, if the political Right and Left disagree on the scale of progressive taxing reasonable and just, they do so under the assumption that our economic system is a predominantly capitalist free-market economy. The contingent nature of the general understanding about the structure of economic system in question is visible in the fact that it hasn’t always been so, and there’s no logical reason standing in the way that the case could be otherwise in the future.

To recap the point made by Care he asserts that “there is a more primitive level of identification of social particulars on which an element of stability is available as a guide” and that “this level of identification is logically prior to the level on which the arguments, debates, and conflicts of participants are a main factor” (Care 1973: 18). I previously argued that these social particulars, even if considered “noncontroversial truisms about persons and their environment” (ibid.) may indeed end up as being contested. Nonetheless, there is no reason to perceive the matter as evidencing essential contestability unless—it can now be hypothesized—the contestation about the social particulars has significance in defining or marking the contours of the form of life involved in the debate in which the said social particular is contested. By keeping this demarcation criterion in mind, it is easier to pinpoint what elements in a given dispute are essentially contested, what social particulars are acknowledged by the participants interlocked in a dispute, and what empirical facts are yet to established—after which they are seen as sort of social particulars themselves in a sense that general understanding about them has been achieved. The

clarification of the elements of any dispute involving validation of some position with a reference to a form of life, whether this is done knowingly or unknowingly, is a step towards a better understanding of key issues encountered in pervasive socio-political disputes that may even lead to a practical closure from time to time. Moreover, this sort of approach is particularly appropriate for finding potential confusions; it might even be that some pervasive disputes turn out to be merely verbal after the disputants have established the set of social particulars they all acknowledge. On the negative side, the addition of yet another “level of arguments” (even if only as a theoretical notion) may complicate the matter needlessly. It must be remembered that, although it is more than feasible that the participants of any given debate about a socio-political issue do indeed share some basic assumptions—thought of as social particulars—along with other empirical facts to a lesser degree, perhaps, the issue of import is not usually a matter of seeing eye-to-eye about the current situation. Instead, the contestation is about the empirical means with which to achieve some generally accepted goal. Nonetheless, the orientation towards the future has no practical effect on the matter of “what counts as essential contestability?” We can roughly say that the setting of future goals in a wider socio-political context is typically a matter essentially contested (when pertinent to forms of life suitably different with each other), although the issue of how that goal, once set, is achieved is not typically a matter evidencing essential contestability (with a qualification that the means used to achieve that goal do not contest the boundaries of some form of life)¹¹⁰. As an example of a dispute within which ‘means’ can become essentially contested one can mention certain abortion disputes. It is more than plausible to think that practically all participants of the said dispute share the goal of improving the health of women and support women’s right to make decisions about their own body as such. The real problem arrives to the scene when one particular ‘mean’ to achieve both of these goals, an abortion for instance, is viewed as

¹¹⁰ All in all, the role of social particulars in the context of essential contestability must be further elucidated; to merely briefly sketch the general relation of the social particulars to issues essentially contested is not enough. Specifically, one must make sense of how participants of these debates view these social particulars from their first person perspective, and how further claims are argued for within the framework provided by them. I assume that in order to do that one should consider the nature of practical argumentation more closely (cf. Pennanen 2012). That is not reasonable within the bounds of the present study.

a violation of the sanctity of life which is a constituting concept behind certain forms of life¹¹¹.

Thirdly, I want to return to an issue discussed in section 2.4, namely the conception by Quentin Skinner that “a refusal to apply the term in a certain situation may constitute an act of social insensitivity or a failure of social awareness” (Skinner 1989: 13). This idea was particularly unsuited for the framework proposed by Gallie since one could easily conceive a situation in which disputants agree about the criteria for applying an appraisive term but the dispute nonetheless emerged over whether a given set of circumstances warranted the normal use of the term. With the notion of normative frameworks we are in a better position to characterize the nature of the dispute of this kind. I argued then that contesting parties must also share (at least partially) an understanding of how the criteria are applied in concrete cases—i.e. in which circumstances the criteria are pertinent. These concrete cases, the circumstances in which the criteria are pertinent, consist of various social particulars that are, or are not, acknowledged. If we consider the example of torture mentioned in section 2.8, we can surmise that the (assumed) failure to see a particular practice of questioning prisoners of war as ‘torture’ (the person seeing it instead as ‘enhanced interrogation’, for example) looks to be the sort of case in which the contestation is about the certain application of the term ‘torture’ in certain circumstances, rather than being a dispute about the criteria of ‘torture’ *per se*. And yes, actual disputes about the issue tend to suggest that to be the case. The party favoring the characterization of the concrete situation under dispute as ‘enhanced interrogation’ may point out that the situation is completely different (of that of ‘torture’) because the interrogation situation is controlled and supervised by doctors and the actual interrogation has well defined goals concerning pertinent information that can be reached rather than being about inflicting pain “just for the sake of it”. Naturally, one can easily contest this sort of characterization of the situation by the advocates of ‘enhanced interrogation’ view. However, what is important for the present purposes is to conclude that the situation characterized in this particular way is not a case of essential contestation since no appeal to forms of life is made—more specifically, no boundaries of certain forms of life are questioned. It must be kept in mind that parties disputing the descriptions of each other might acknowledge the same basic

¹¹¹ At this point it is worth to remind a reader that the thesis of essential contestability I personally advocate for is not meant to prescribe any certain ethical stance in any given issue. Also, I would not consider it as a valid argument to use the thesis as “a cop-out” in any given argument although one might still expect the other party to give at least some appreciation to the fact forms of life are at stake (although quite often this too would be contested, I imagine).

criteria for ‘torture’. Social or moral insensitivity as such is no indication of essential contestability¹¹².

Generally speaking, sensitivity to an issue (in the sense above) is more likely to arise as a result of interpreting a concept or idea according to one’s normative framework. Generally speaking a person is ascribing a positive or negative valence to a concept according to her normative frameworks—now seen as a general attitude to issues of moral and social character—and these valuations may vary greatly depending on the concept in question—some normative concepts are clearly more completely shared than others which implies an effect of socialization on valuations¹¹³—but also depending on the person appraising the concept. Sensitivity in itself is a relative concept; by uttering it we implicitly assume that some people are more sensitive than others even if, at the same time, we demand sensitivity to issues personally considered important or, to be more precise, we demand sensitivity to particular arguments for or against certain issue. By doing so we assume that sensitivity is not solely a natural capacity of an individual randomly predestined in birth, thus, as a social matter, at least partially, we assume it evolving in the course of human life and in interaction with other people. Therefore I’m inclined to think that the sensitivity towards some issues and insensitivity towards others is the perceived result of “correct” or “incorrect” application of the normative frameworks of interpretation.

Be that as it may, there are, I argue, cases of social insensitivity or failure of social awareness that can be characterized as evidencing essential contestability. These cases are typically manifest in occasions in which a particular group demands another group—usually a majority of population in a given society—or political/legal authorities to recognize the form of life embraced by the (minority) group¹¹⁴. Examples of this are

¹¹² The accusation of ethical or social insensitivity can be undoubtedly considered as a rhetorical move but not without significance since we commonly view it as a “fair move” or “valid point”. On the other hand, in social situations we often view ethical sensitivity overriding “being correct” or “winning an argument”. We can characterize the issue in psychological terms but not without remainder, I assume, since social sensitivity has meaning for people and its meaning is constructed intersubjectively which has a tendency to objectify the meaning on normative level, possibly transforming the normative requirement for social sensitivity to a status of social fact. I cover the relation between *ad hominem* argumentation (distinguished from *ad personam*), presumptions and acknowledged social facts in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012).

¹¹³ The extent to which concepts are shared is not discussed in this study (see fn.120 in the end of the current section).

¹¹⁴ There is an ever growing literature available, dubbed commonly as ‘politics of recognition’, in which these type of considerations are discussed. Due to economic reasons it is not reasonable to cover that here and I can only refer to couple of works. Charles Taylor’s “The Politics of Recognition” (Taylor 1994) and Axel Honneth’s *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995) are especially noteworthy. To get a clearer grasp on the political aspects of the issue, I would also recommend *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction* (Thompson 2006) and *Redistribution or Recognition?* (Fraser and Honneth 2003).

plentiful, one could mention for instance feminist movement, struggles to get recognition for one's sexual identity, the "black" rights movement, various language minorities etc. What is common to all is an attempt to find a place within larger framework of forms of life. This requires drawing a line between the groups demanding recognition in such a way that the specific characteristics of the form of life are acknowledged and accepted without losing the features marking the group distinct in the first place. The struggle for recognition is undertaken within certain set of social particulars generally accepted and about which there is a widely shared understanding. For instance, the gay rights advocates can argue that they are entitled to get married based on the equality principle—seen now as a contingent social particular codified in law, not as a moral principle—found in the most constitutions of (Western) societies. No one is denying that the citizens should not be treated alike. What is contested is the relation of 'marriage' to the form of life in question, and more to the point still, what is contested is the relation of 'marriage' to a form of life in question on the grounds that 'marriage' has a special relationship to another form of life from which it cannot be separated.

Of course, there are various disputes around this "fundamental" issue, some of which are not to be characterized as evidencing essential contestability. Due to the nature of the struggle for recognition matters such as political and moral rights, relations of power, respect, non- and misrecognition, the status of ethical categories in relation to structural social-political categories, to name just a few, enter into the picture as soon as the surface of the issue is scratched. Their relation to the phenomenon of essential contestability is not straightforwardly clear and must be bypassed for now although the case can arguably be made that large tract of "everyday essential contestability" can be characterized with the approach explicit in various theories of recognition. Furthermore, to broach the matter of essential contestability with the perspective of the politics of recognition may be particularly suited to circumvent some of the problems arising out of the view of conceptual frameworks as incommensurable with each other.

It was argued above that to characterize the matter with the help of the notion of 'normative frameworks' makes it easier to answer some of the concerns problematic and left open while Gallie's original theory was discussed in the previous chapter. Along with the brief examination of the issues of reflexivity, social particulars and social (in)sensitivity/(un)awareness I formed the hypothesis of essential contestability emerging out of the contestation between various forms of life. It is now pertinent to consider the relation of normative frameworks to the evaluation of particular socio-political concepts

from this point of view in order to create more dialogue with theses of essential contestability—Gallie’s theory being the main culprit, naturally—that focus on the matter on the level of concepts alone¹¹⁵.

There are a wide variety of concepts that are formed from normative or moral perspective. The very understanding of those concepts hinge on a normative framework of an individual, or, on at least partially shared normative framework of community (or social group, society etc.). Whether we are “right” or “wrong” in our interpretation of a situation does not change the fact that we do so from normative perspective. Or, as William Connolly characterizes the issue...

“These concepts describe from a moral point of view, not in the sense that to say one has broken a promise is always to conclude that the described act must be wrong, but in the sense that the concepts themselves would not be formed, would not combine within one rubric a set of features, unless there were some point in doing so - unless we shared a moral point of view that these concepts concretize and reflect” (Connolly 1993: 24)¹¹⁶.

In relation to the claim that essential contestability is manifested as a result of attempting to mark the limits of a form of life, we can now assume, I claim, that the normative frameworks serving as lenses through which particular socio-political concepts are formed provide the point to combine set of features within one rubric i.e. the criteria the concepts consist of are put in a ranking order, to follow Gallie’s expression, so that the concept now substantiated concretize and reflect a normative point of view. When the concept in question is used as defining the contours of the form of life, it has potential to be the object of conceptual dispute that Gallie characterized as essentially contested. These contests, empirically speaking, do not take place in every situation in which the concept central to one or another form of life is employed because there to be a contest at all requires opposing views, thus the expression “potential”. Nonetheless, if the statement that these contests revolve around the various characterizations of different forms of life is plausible, there is reason to believe that the contest is ‘essential’, if it is assumed that it is

¹¹⁵ One way to see the change of scenery from the focus on the concepts to the perspective of normative frameworks is to consider it as the translation of the concerns of the former to the language of the latter which is hopefully better suited in handling those issues.

¹¹⁶ For a viewpoint directly opposed to the one presented in this section, see *Political Concepts: A Reconstruction* (Oppenheim 1981) in which Felix Oppenheim tries to explicate unambiguous set of neutral and descriptive concepts for social sciences. William Connolly has argued—rather convincingly, in my opinion—that Oppenheim’s reconstruction of ‘power’ “does not represent a neutral language of political inquiry” instead expressing “a technocratic ideal of politics” (Connolly 1993: 221–5). As such, its purported neutrality is highly questionable.

necessary for the disputants, or people in general, to frame the contours and boundaries of their affirmed form of life in order to make sense of that form of life. The locus of meaning would be, then, found in the dispute itself. The thesis of essential contestability that takes a definitive stance affirming, for example, the ontological status of value pluralism (in which values are seen as radically incommensurable with each other) as the fundamental source for the essential contestability, would posit the locus of meaning to the same level actual forms of life are affirmed. That would make it a thesis of essential contestability in a first order sense. Whereas in the latter conception the source for essential contestability is seen as emerging from the (incommensurability of) subject matter, the former conception sees the matter as both conceptual/linguistic and substantive.

To characterize any social issue or to interpret any socio-political concept of normative quality—i.e. any concept we see as having normative implications; one cannot hope to make an exhaustive list beforehand—is to do so within the normative frameworks one has. We see things as we are. This is especially poignant considering that these concepts also include epistemic construals concretized in the ways we use them. In other words, various epistemic construals are enmeshed in certain concepts to such a degree that using those concepts directs not only our normative outlook but the way we gain an epistemic access to the world as well. These concepts are often presented as bipolarities; ‘subject/object’ being the paradigmatic pairing. Arguably there also exist concepts which “rest” on certain epistemic construals having clear normative implications as well. ‘Public’ and ‘private’ are good examples of that type of concepts. Some of the concepts can perhaps be reduced to their respective elements like in the case of ‘public/private’ in which a conceptual background structure can be seen as a sum of ‘universal/particular’ and a normative component deriving its precise concretization from societal structure. However, these kind of reductions are somewhat awkward and do not usually give us much substantive insight into the nature of a concept in question and they can indeed be even misleading if other pairings such as ‘internal/external’, ‘irrational/rational’ and ‘female/male’ are not taken into account as relevant connotations.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the normative frameworks, providing a rationale for grouping certain features of concepts under one rubric, is the possibility to reinterpret a phenomenon or a concept in question in changing circumstances. The commonsensical assumption here is, as I see it, that concepts in themselves do not contain any inherent rationale that would ordain the needed changes in new circumstances. It is

exactly the normative point of view (or, a moral point of view, as Connolly puts it¹¹⁷) which orders the necessary changes, so to speak, to the ranking order of the criteria the concept consists of in unforeseen and changing circumstances¹¹⁸; this viewpoint is capable of retaining the spirit I claim to be explicit in Gallie's theory, namely the objection to conceptual essentialism. With the above considerations of epistemic construals concretized in the ways we use them and the ability to evaluate the criteria of the concept in changing circumstances we can tie these notions more closely to the discussion of the relation between forms of life and essential contestability.

“To understand a concept, to grasp the meaning of the words which express it, is always at least to learn what the rules are which govern the use of such words and so to grasp the role of the concept in language and social life. This in itself would suggest strongly that different forms of social life will provide different roles for concepts to play. Or at least for some concepts this seems likely to be the case” (MacIntyre 1998: 1)¹¹⁹.

Regarding Gallie's original theory I have concluded that the problematics associated to it point outside the actual concepts to the notions of 'form of life' and 'normative frameworks'. As the above quote from MacIntyre suggests there are elements in our conceptual usage that, to be understood properly, can be explained only in relation to considerations taking account not only linguistic aspects but substantive matters of social life as well. Although it is frustratingly hard to demonstrate the latter part of MacIntyre's assertion, it offers us a fertile ground into which the seeds of essential contestability may be plausibly planted. As Wittgenstein has shown us there certainly are at least some concepts and practices which cannot be understood outside their own language game that is intimately linked to a particular form of life ('praying', for example). And certainly the factors looked into previously—namely reflexivity and social (in)sensitivity/(un)awareness—that might reasonably be seen as potential sources of

¹¹⁷ "To say that an appraisive concept is understood by exploring the connection between its criteria and its point is not, remember, to conclude that neither of these dimensions is ever subject to dispute" (Connolly 1993: 29–30).

¹¹⁸ William Connolly states that "(W)ere we to ignore the moral point of view from which each is formed, we would also lose our ability to judge how these concepts apply to new and unforeseen situations" (Connolly 1993: 28).

¹¹⁹ Connolly makes a similar kind of claim: "Their points can be understood only by grasping the way in which they summarize and crystallize shared moral judgments, but their rules of application are not specified finely enough to ensure that every conceivable act falling within the rules specified embodies (for the community that shares these ideas) the moral judgment that most such acts do" (Connolly 1993: 27).

essential contestability point towards the same direction: to account for essential contestability one must take into consideration substantive forms of life¹²⁰.

3.2 Identity and the normative frameworks

Stuart Hall begins his introduction in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Hall 1996) by asking: who needs ‘identity’? In the present section I argue that the theoretical concept of identity is needed by a plausible thesis of essential contestability. From a substantive, more personal first person perspective, it can also be asserted that the notion of identity is, still, quite useful in making sense of the matters in which notions such as ‘a form of life’, ‘the social reality’ and ‘a sense of being a person’ abound. There are two main objectives set for the current section: 1) to elucidate the relation between the normative frameworks, identity and forms of life, and 2) to provide footing for the next section, in which the notion of transitional rationality is presented in order to make sense of the conversion from one conception to another, so that the conversion might be viewed not only as rational but meaningful as well.

Before tackling the concept of identity, I have to address the matter of interchangeability between ‘normative frameworks’ and ‘identity’. In normative political philosophy these two concepts are often used as interchangeable i.e. one could replace one concept with another without incurring a substantial tension in a theory. This is illustrated especially well in the matter of identity claims i.e. in a situation in which one is seeking or demanding recognition for one identity or another. The matter was previously characterized as a matter of social sensitivity for certain forms of life, a yet another conceivable portrayal of the issue. The partial point behind the normative frameworks, as I have defined the matter before, is to form a link between a person and concepts requiring normative judgments in such a way that we could better understand the twofold process of the interpretation of the concepts, in which a person interprets the concepts (and the things

¹²⁰ There are a lot of relevant considerations for a comprehensive account of essential contestability that have not been covered in this section. Regarding the relation of concepts of normative quality and the conceptual frameworks of individual interpreting them, especially acute are 1) likely/possible incompleteness of shared concepts, and 2) the separation between ‘thin’ and ‘thick concepts’, the latter of which “seem to express a union of fact and value” (Williams 1985: 143) and the possibility of ‘disentanglement’ of fact and value (I am indebted to Arto Laitinen for pointing out this second consideration). Although I have affirmed, more or less, that one should not be too focused on the nature of concepts, the essential contestability as a phenomenon both linguistic/conceptual and substantive makes it necessary to view the issue as comprehensively as possible. The aspects of the issue mentioned and their implications for the thesis of essential contestability will be discussed in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012).

these concepts represent) according to his normative frameworks while his normative frameworks change and evolve as a result of the intersubjective interpretation process. We can frame the same basic situation by using the concept 'identity' instead by depicting the process by saying that it is as if the person positions his identity in relation to the concept or issue at hand, and as a result of this positioning, he forms a conception of a concept. However, this is linguistically rather awkward. For that purpose the term 'normative frameworks' suits better, in my opinion. But, there are obvious advantages in using the term 'identity' as well. For once, we can make much more commonsensical assertions about the interplay of various social roles and expectations, quite possibly being at odds with each other, with the use of 'identity'. That is to say, the use of 'identity' converges better on the common associations, concerning the interrelated issues, in ordinary language than the term 'normative frameworks' would.

What is actually the substantive difference between 'normative frameworks' and 'identity' besides the fact that they are used as varied heuristic means to achieve an understanding on the matter?

“In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin of shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the 'naturalism' of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always 'in progress'” (Hall 1996: 2).

It is exactly the twofold quality of 'identity' that makes it so adaptable for various theoretical purposes. In the first sense, the identity is seen as a somewhat concrete entity that is derived in rather unproblematic fashion from certain ethnic and social background. Because the connection to the origin (real or imagined) can be drawn, the identity one holds presently must be something having a continuity (often separated to subsequent stages of life). In the second sense, the identity is thought as a process in which one's identity is in a constant flux. Whereas the identity in the first sense was something one can affirm, the second sense affirms a fact that no identity is ever complete as an individual strives to construct her identity in discursive relation with the surrounding social reality.

There are two main perspectives to the issue of “identification as a construction” specifically. In relation to the social world the identification processes of individuals or groups serve as sustaining and maintaining the structure of the social world. In this picture the identification is thought as recognition of common origin of shared characteristics

between persons and groups or as an allegiance to some ideal (type) present in the social world. From this perspective, the process of identification is never completed as one generation after another takes part in constructing the social reality exceeding the limitedness of individual beings. In relation to the life project of an individual person, however, the process of identification cannot be plausibly seen as “maintaining” or “sustaining” but rather as an attempt of finding one’s place in social realm. When the continuous nature of the process is seen from a timeless perspective, the issue of finding one’s place is transformed to a sort of choice of deciding with which parts of social reality one is “identical”. This sort of thinking is especially glaring in cases in which one is trying to sort out the standpoint of some other individual who is expressing his views about matters of social or political significance. Is the person “leftist” or “right-wing” is a matter of attempting to place her on the landscape already in place. These sorts of identifications are not unusual even when the person herself is evaluating her own position.

With these considerations in mind we can proceed to evaluate the relation between the normative frameworks and the identity. In section 3.1 the normative frameworks was examined mostly from a third person perspective. With the notion of identity in the mix it is now of paramount importance to view the matter from a first person perspective. Thus, the normative frameworks serve as lenses through which an individual views the things encountered in everyday life. I previously argued that the composition of the normative frameworks is intimately bound to a form of life an individual has adopted. The rules governing the usage and interpretation of socio-political concepts and particulars are partly derived from such forms of life. With the notion of discursive formation of an identity on the table, we can regard the normative frameworks as a conceptual map guiding and regulating the process of constructing one’s identity. The actual process takes place in present tense but it is important to realize its open nature; our current normative frameworks have formed in a particular way as a result of what has happened before, what import we have attested to significant events of our life. The identity—i.e. what makes us the persons we are—is not only a result of what has happened before but includes our future hopes and dreams as well: what kind of persons we want to be in the future?

The analogy between a map and a some kind of conceptual tool kit—defined as a normative framework, set of conceptions or something similar—is often used and for a good reason. It seems to capture the essential quality of our conceptual usage, that is to say, our ability to navigate around the social world by showing us how one feature is related to others and highlighting some features deemed important. Without these kind of

conceptual maps the social reality would be a chaotic sequence of incomprehensible phenomena, or so it is often implied. Let's consider the following comparison from Gerald Gaus:

“Now, one thing a rational agent wants is a consistent map. Imagine you are visiting Australia, and you wish to drive from Sydney to Melbourne. After nine hours, you stop to consult your map to see just where you are. Unfortunately, your map has two different, inconsistent parts; if you look at the first sheet you are almost in Melbourne, but if you check the second, you have gone entirely in the wrong direction and will soon be in Brisbane. Where are you, and which direction should you go? Clearly, an inconsistent map is no help at all. Until the entire map makes sense and all its directions are consistent with each other, it does not even begin to help you make sense of your (conceptual) world” (Gaus 2000: 38)¹²¹.

Indeed, a consistent map is superior to an inconsistent one as far as an individual using the map to make sense of her surroundings is concerned. This does not automatically guarantee that the map is the correct one, however, when viewed from a third person perspective. It might be that the locations and geographical contours shown on the map depict the reality quite oddly: mountains are described merely as hills; cities are portrayed as villages, for instance. With the map of this kind the individual using it to navigate her way in the world is not doing so haphazardly, and more importantly, is able to arrive to “right” locations but we would not be inclined to say that she has a realistic understanding of her surroundings. And yet, it is likely that the maps we all are using on daily basis are not thoroughly consistent or able to portray social reality without complications. It is often the case that one is confounded by the things encountered in social reality and it may take a while to translate these irregularities and abnormalities to the language of one's conceptual map of interpretation¹²². Thus, there is a need to keep one's conceptual map as consistent

¹²¹ Gaus is actually using this example in relation to the idea of essential contestability hoping to clarify the issue in his book *Political Concepts and Political Theories* (2000).

¹²² The necessity of this sort of translation as far as human persons are concerned seems to be quite fundamental. In sections 2.6 and 2.7 I raised a concern that the idea of essential contestability may be tied to modern liberal understanding of one's place in a society. The necessity of translation depicted here, on the contrary, seems not to be a result of a particular (modern) understanding. Naturally, there are differences in outlooks typical to various epochs. For example, if we encounter a violent person raving about the things only he can see, we are inclined to view it as some sort of mental disorder requiring for treatment. It was not so long ago that a person behaving in exactly the same way was viewed perhaps as possessed by a demon and needing a treatment of another sort, namely exorcism. In both cases the common denominator is the translation of an encountered irregularity to fit one's conceptual mapping of social reality.

as possible although it is not complete in a sense that the particular map could show without a hinge of doubt that one's take on a social issue is correct¹²³.

As I see the situation, the intersubjective process of interpretation is equivalent with checking one's conceptual map. Same turns and twists, confrontations and collaborations with other people, provide a ground for the re-evaluation of the (normative) conceptual framework of the individual person. This process is continuous in a sense that the whole human experience is essentially a continuum. Only when we take a synchronistic look on a person in separate points in time, t_0 and t_x , can we fathom the situation in terms of checking the parts of social reality one is "identical with". Regarding a time perspective of individual human beings, the paradoxical statements are often unavoidable. If one views the time perspective of the person as the continuum, one can arrive to the conclusion that the person is always in a starting location and in a destination at the same time, metaphorically speaking. Nonetheless, I want to emphasize the conception that the conceptual mapping of social and political world is effectively happening as a continuous series of checks and balances to the extent an individual is concerned. It is entirely plausible that despite these checks and balances the person "arrives at the wrong location" by her own admission (or by others').

In the case of specific concepts of normative quality we are interested in, the same logic requiring consistent definitions in the form of ranking order of various criteria of application seems to be at work. The need for one's conceptual map to be consistent is parallel to the need for one's definition of a concept to be consistent. In the first instance, the failure to achieve consistency is evidenced by incoherent evaluations of social issues while the failure to form a consistent set of criteria for a concept is a mark of confused use of a concept i.e. two or more concepts are, typically, confused with each other. Can we plausibly follow this logic to the extreme by stating that the inconsistency evidenced in one's conceptual map is a sign that two or more persons are confused with each other?

In order to conceive an individual personality as divided to the degree that one can entertain oneself with the idea of separate persons in conflict with each other requires the

¹²³ Thus, when Gaus states that "(C)learly, an inconsistent map is no help at all. Until the entire map makes sense and all its directions are consistent with each other, it does not even begin to help you make sense of your (conceptual) world" we should, in my opinion, see his statement as a black-and-white-depiction of the issue which turns out to be rather implausible when taken literally. I personally see the approach of cognitive psychologist who sees the perceived irregularity as a starting point for learning—compelling an individual to reorganize her conceptual schemas accordingly—as a plausible depiction of the situation.

timeless third person perspective¹²⁴—in order to compare these personalities on equal footing—implying a conception of identity according to which our identities have cores that need to be found in order to realize one’s place in a larger scheme. The failure to identify a stable and unchanging core would mean, in this framework, that there are several cores which in turn would imply that there are several persons—in relation to several life stages—instead of acknowledging the problematical nature of even assuming such a core. I claim that this sort of account misconstrues the situational character of identity formation by ignoring historical contingencies. If the content of one’s identity is identical to some aspects of social reality already in place, it means that his identity has some essential characteristics that are straightforwardly commensurable with the social reality. There are certainly some characteristics common to all human beings which are as essential as can be conceived—this set of characteristics is typically called ‘human condition’—but they do not determine the whole of identifications, when conceived as finding one’s place in social reality, as it is more than plausible that various persons identify with cultural and social ideals not necessarily commensurable with each other. More so, someone who claims that identification is a matter of comparing one’s (essential) identity in relation to the social reality must answer to the question of change in identifications over time. To phrase it bluntly, the world is full of capitalists who were (self-admittedly) hippies or socialists in their youth. For that reason alone it is quite safe to assume along with Stuart Hall that...

“...directly contrary to what appears to be its settled semantic career, this concept of identity [conceived as strategic and positional] does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already ‘the same’, identical to itself across time” (Hall 1996: 3).

It is a common assumption nowadays that individual identities are fragmentary by nature. If identities are never unified or singular being rather “multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses practices and positions” (ibid. 4) it is hard to see why we would assume people to have coherent, comprehensive and commensurable conceptions about social matters instead of bits and pieces here and there always in a constant tension. If we take as given that the identities and social roles of

¹²⁴ This assertion is based on an assumption that a person taking a first person perspective to her identity cannot avoid a time perspective in which one is situated in the present looking back to the past or hoping something from the future. Naturally, the person looking into the matter from a timeless third person perspective does so from a first person perspective of her own rendering the third person perspective to be a necessary abstraction.

people are created and maintained in an intersubjective interpretation process in which normative frameworks play a crucial role as they are the medium through which the concepts and “signs or symbols” of the complex life-world are interpreted as meaningful, we caught a glimpse of these identities and roles as being mostly comparative by nature. For a concrete person, I argue, the transition from one position to another is meaningful as a comparative matter, not as a matter of evaluating the objective merits of one position or another based on a standard outside actual experience and viewed from a timeless third person perspective. It is in no way clear that we should evaluate the intelligibility of possible conversion—bringing the focus closer to the specific issues of our interest—from one view to another as a matter requiring criteria and reasons founded outside the perspective of a particular person¹²⁵. The very experience of “growing as a person” is a matter of comparing one’s experiences and, most especially, one’s attitude, responses and general perspective to a life that has been and is yet to come, in other words, to make a *better* sense of personal and social life. Regarding “making sense of one’s life” a certain type of asymmetricality between the different stages of life is evident. The list of people who think that they understood the world better when they were younger is thin indeed. This experience may be caused due to a psychological rationalization but the main point I’m trying to make here is that the notion of conversion from one view to another despite the lack of objective justification (in a strict sense) of the new view (or of the old, for that matter) is intelligible and a person going through these conversions can be motivated to do so possibly in the future as well despite the lack of the standards of strictly objective nature with which to ground one’s views about the world in a once-and-for-all-sense.

The concept of identity, along with its cognates, is at the crux of the matter in understanding a personal view point of a particular individual in relation to wider perspectives to social world. We can conceptualize the issue by assuming that each individual has a unique *personal outlook on life*, or a “philosophy of life”, which typically consists of often incoherent elements since it has been formed through a process of practical responses to various challenges faced in the course of one’s life. The main condition for a successful form of life in this respect is notably pragmatic by nature. Usually one cannot choose the events of one’s life needing a pragmatic response in any meaningful way when wanting to live “a full life” if not for any other reason than the fact

¹²⁵ This type of thinking seems to be required in claims that the idea of essential contestability—seen as a matter of there being no definitive once-and-for-all definitions of concepts to be had—makes the conversion from one view to another insensible and unintelligible.

that our fellow human beings throw us challenges and questions demanding some sort of an answer on daily basis¹²⁶. In contrast to personal outlooks on life are the various *world views* to which individuals and groups subscribe. These tend to be more comprehensive accounts of the order of social world often implicating ethical positions that are more general in nature. These general world views can be often presented as comprehensive and coherent perspectives to various issues present in social world. Whereas one is deeply and unavoidably embedded to one's personal life along with the good and the bad it brings it, the general world views identified are thought to be separate from individuals having often a life span of many generations. It is tempting to think the situation illustrated as akin to the situation in which one is in a grocery store choosing what to eat today. Despite our personal preferences the store holds various goods that are there also tomorrow. We could continue by saying that even though one's very own individual preferences have not a large impact on available goods the clientele of the store as a whole determines the goods that are offered. The products in themselves are not unique although the way we fill the shopping cart can be seen as such.

The analogy presented should not be stressed too far. What is salient for the present purpose is a realization of different perspectives one can take on the issue. We can look the matter of choosing between various general world views as a matter of rational choice for which there are rational reasons to be found in a peculiarly more objective and theoretical way than we often do in cases of personal lives deeply embedded in concrete situations. As a matter of forming opinions about the multifaceted social reality the world views actually adopted are surely influenced by our personal outlooks for which we often have no clear reasons that are in a coherent relation to each other. This can be conceptualized by stating the obvious: our actual experiences in life affect the way we see

¹²⁶ Even if one would want to avoid controversial and unpleasant situations in one's social relations this can be unavoidable when a friend or a loved one demands you to "choose sides" in a conflict involving your close relations. It is often the case that one must simply try to survive the day while hoping to maintain a personal integrity and honesty

social world in a more general way. Still, the fact of the matter is often downplayed or belittled when general world views and the reasons behind them are considered¹²⁷.

The overall picture can be rudimentarily presented, when *identity* is taken into account, as follows:

personal outlook(s) ↔ identity/identities ↔ general world view(s)

Stuart Hall (1992) distinguishes three conceptions of identity still prevalent in modern times: Enlightenment subject, sociological subject and post-modern subject. The Enlightenment subject is based on “a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason” whose inner core remains essentially the same “throughout the individual’s existence... the essential centre of the self was a person’s identity” (Hall 1992: 275). The Enlightenment conception is often called “Cartesian subject” for its assumption that a human being is capable of disengaging oneself from the actuality of one’s situatedness in order to find self-evident knowledge by reason alone. The core of one’s identity is not affected by one’s surroundings rendering identity as one, a thing that is truly identical with itself.

The assumption behind the sociological conception of identity denies that the identity remains essentially the same over time. The identity is “formed in relation to ‘significant others’, who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols—the culture—of the worlds he/she inhabited... The subject still has an inner core or essence that is ‘the real me’, but this is formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds ‘outside’ and the identities which they offer” (ibid. 275–6). According to this conception identity brings together the public world, or ‘outside’, with the personal world, or ‘inside’, in unifying manner. Before I used the grocery store example to illustrate the nature of general world views, now, along with the sociological conception, we can present the identity as a place in which general world views and one’s personal outlook on life come together forming a coherent whole that, unlike the Cartesian subject, is

¹²⁷ In the liberal tradition the difference between personal outlooks and general world views is eliminated by subjugating the difference entailed (in the distinction) by carving up the social reality to its public and private realms in a seemingly self-evident way. As is the case with practically all bipolarities one particular polarity is (usually) considered as more important than the other, namely ‘public’. As an upshot of this particular conceptualization the difference is objectified as manageable factor i.e. private preferences are transformed into mere interests—and as belonging to a group of ‘interests’—which are treated as same. Well, of course, one must treat that which is same as same. However, this is clearly an attempt to conceptualize the social reality by using the bipolarity of public/private aggressively with a background interest of managing the difference.

continuously affected by the social surroundings, or ‘significant others’ making it a more fluid conception. Still, the identity is one, although a one that changes over time, and it can be considered unique from a first person perspective.

Thus, the sociological conception of identity “sutures” the subject into the social structure stabilizing the subject and the social world respectively. Stuart Hall claims that this balance between the subject and the social structure is now in jeopardy as a result of structural and institutional change in late-modern time. “The subject previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities” (ibid. 276–7). The purpose of the sociological conception of identity is to unify the identity as a result of identification process through which actual persons project themselves into cultural identities. That process, however...

“...has become more open-ended, variable and problematic... [producing] the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity... The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’” (ibid. 277, brackets added)¹²⁸.

The conception of identity implicated throughout my thesis is very similar to the sociological conception explicated by Hall. Also, I have stated that we cannot close our eyes from the fact of fragmentary nature of identities in late-modern times. Does this mean that both the Enlightenment conception and the sociological conception have to be dismissed outright? It seems that the Enlightenment conception should be rejected at least. The main reason for that is its implausible demarcation between a subject and a concrete social context said subject finds herself in. I do not wish to claim that one could not improve and develop the Enlightenment conception further. For the present purpose of treating the phenomenon of essential contestability as intimately linked to various forms of life the conception purporting a view, according to which a subject is capable of disengaging oneself from her social situatedness unproblematically, seems to offer little resources. The sociological conception, however, does not need to subscribe to a problematic conception of reason and rationality of the kind explicit in the Enlightenment conception¹²⁹. But is it still defective notion in its attempt to provide a unified identity?

¹²⁸ Hall makes a convincing case about the reasons and causes behind the arrival of post-modern identity in *The Questions of Cultural Identity*. Those interested in “the birth and death of the modern subject” would do well to see his account of the issue (Hall 1992: 274–91).

¹²⁹ Compare to the discussion about apodeictic reasoning in the next section.

I will argue for the notion that we still need a conception of identity resembling the sociological conception because of our phenomenological experience of ourselves as social actors. It is plausible to assume that “within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are constantly shifted about” (ibid. 277). Also, I agree with Hall that “if we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves (ibid. 277). But, if we hope to have any understanding on the issue of conversion from one view to another as a rational move, we must take the experience of ‘narrative of the self’ seriously, for it is only within such a narrative, that pragmatic comparison on the merits of the new conception over the older one can be made at all when the issues irrevocably connected to the life-projects and forms of life are considered¹³⁰. This perspective to ‘identity’ has an upshot of seeing the identity as a space in which the evaluations made through one’s normative frameworks of interpretation take their concrete form in open-ended way i.e. no single conception of any key social or political concept—which are considered as “tools” for carving up the social reality—can be meaningfully evaluated without taking into account the normative framework from within the evaluation process takes place. Thus, no single conception or a set of conceptions can be evaluated solely as a matter of ‘personal outlook’ or ‘general world view’ objectified as separate from identity. To adopt the perspective advocated in the present section is to reject Gallie’s attempt to frame the thesis of essential contestability without a recourse to metaphysical grounding as misguided or, at the very least, unfruitful project¹³¹. If the specific approach being explicated in the present chapter is deemed more plausible, one cannot do without at least some ontological judgments.

Naturally, to understand matters (of social importance or otherwise) in a general way, one must do generalizations. Despite that the problem is that of distorted perspective

¹³⁰ What makes the post-modern identity “post-modern” is the emphasis on historicity as opposed to sociological or biological unity. Putting emphasis on contingency of the various stages in building and forming various identities is to see each particular identity as unique in principle. One can abstract the perceived uniqueness by forming a synchronistic picture of the identity but not without a loss of difference. The same loss of difference confronts a particular person trying to construct her ‘narrative of the self’ as unified i.e. as something that stitches together ‘outside’ with ‘inside’. Ultimately, that makes the process of forming a unified identity an unstable and open-ended project. If there is no stable and self-evident social reality outside a particular personal perspective to be found, the pragmatic stability a person yearns for can be found only temporally within a frame of normative frameworks and personal identities which are in a process of constant change. To acknowledge the need for a historical perspective and narrative identity does not necessarily mean that we should abandon the sociological conception as outdated. Indeed, it can be argued that the need to unify one’s identity is a central prerequisite of post-modern outlook. Otherwise the fragmentation of identity would not be seen as a problem at all.

¹³¹ With a qualification: “unless we want to embrace radical relativism in a form of linguistic autonomy”.

when one is denying a motivation of an individual to undergo a conversion from one view to another, or rejecting the plausibility of motivation of an individual to have a contestation at all, when the issue is seen solely on the level of world views demanding rational reasons to back them up. It is as if one should provide a reason for an abstract person with an *interest to have that general interest at all* when faced up with a realization that there is no clear alternative to choose in respect of it having no once-and-for-all rational reasons to back it up. But, we do still make calculations even if there are no self-evident basis for ‘mathematics’ to be found. We do still have a motivation to buy products in a grocery store even if we do not absolutely know what product or a combination of products is best for us for we have to eat, it is our human condition.

To state the assumption made here explicitly: it is presumed that the motivation to hold beliefs that are essentially uncertain, as far as their ultimate conditions of being true or correct are considered, “springs forth” from the perspective of assuming an individual life as unique, as far as a person herself is concerned. This may be due to reasons that are characterizable in terms of psychological reasons which can be framed as an element of our human condition. Were this assumption of uniqueness to change dramatically in the future we would be no longer humans in the sense we see ourselves now¹³². With the notion of identity as a continuous narrative of one’s personal life formed in an on-going intersubjective process of interpretation (checks and balances) by the “employment” of normative frameworks—remembering the sense of interchangeability between ‘identity’ and ‘normative frameworks’—that serve its use of making sense of the world best when consistent and coherent, we can begin to grasp better the need for the stability and unity of one’s identity. From a third person perspective actions of an individual tend to be perceived as following each other but random and arbitrary when one focuses on singular actions. This sense of the lack of interconnectedness dissipates when the first person perspective to identity is considered. The important realization is, of course, that a person

¹³² There is a logical possibility that human species will evolve as a species with a hive-mind, for example, in which case there would be no sense to talk of uniqueness as a matter of personal experience. Then again, there is no point to consider those kinds of alternatives. More interesting and forceful criticism can be presented against the case I’m trying to make here. Even if I would explicate the position adopted with a theoretical precision going beyond the scope of the purpose of the thesis, I assume it could be criticized as being inescapably historically bound conception, as part of social condition, which, at best, would succeed only in illustrating the motivational character of Western people. I have no objection against that, indeed, I want to embrace that sort of self-conception myself. Our understanding of ourselves is deeply and inescapably historical and socially contextualized. From that perspective attempts to understand the historically bound nature of our social being is a *unique* enterprise even if shared by contemporaries. For clarification, I assume that the motivation to do practical philosophy – to which we, as researchers, are evidently motivated – at all is parallel to a motivation of a single individual to understand her unique place in a larger scheme of things.

may take a third person perspective to her own life opening the floodgates of uncertainty. Nonetheless, it is certainty that we yearn for, I claim, thus one has to assume a conception of identity that is not uncertain by its very core, for instance, the post-modern outlook. This is a sort of phenomenological requirement to see one's life as a meaningful, continuous whole. Consider the following:

“The need for certainty is much older than something called the Enlightenment Project, obviously implicated, for example, in all religions. The need for certainty is endemic to the human condition; it is a mechanism of psychological denial as the young Sartre argued, deriving from our terror at the transience of all things, including ourselves, and we can no more abandon it than cease to be intelligent creatures. To deny this will blind theorists to why people continue to construct foundational theories, however rickety they turn out to be and whatever they fail to explain” (Shapiro 1989: 69).

In an attempt to provide a plausible conception of identity that can support the conception of rationality presented in the next section it is not enough to make a blanket statement that a consistent identity or conceptual map is better than an inconsistent one. The notion must be tied to our human condition; therein lies its strength and weakness as a background assumption. For that purpose, I guess, the Enlightenment conception of identity could serve as well although I personally favor the sociological conception since it has capacity to make sense of our connection to our social surroundings more comprehensively and plausibly¹³³. The disputes involving concepts used to mark the contours of various forms of life are now seen to threaten the certainty needed thus transforming “merely” definitional disputes to be about the stability and unity of one's identity.

3.3 Transitional rationality

In the course of the last two sections I have attempted to provide an alternative perspective to the issue of essential contestability. In this section I concentrate on the issue of conversion from one view to another, the matter which is considerably problematic in Gallie's framework for reasons discussed earlier in chapter 2. The key task at hand is to provide an account of rationality suitable to a thesis of essential contestability under

¹³³ I do not mean to imply that the post-modern conception is without its uses, on the contrary, it serves as a well thought characterization of the concern endemic to our current social condition.

development. More to the point, one must illustrate how a conversion from one view to another, at a personal level, can be seen as rational and meaningful although no definite justifications for one view or another are attainable. Rather than forming a conception of rationality from scratch, I turn my attention to the works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor and claim that the model of transitional rationality proposed by them is particularly suitable for the present purpose. The contribution of Taylor is given some light first after which we can turn our attention to MacIntyre's views concerning the issue in section 3.4.

Charles Taylor has nicely formulated the position much akin to mine in his essay "Explanation and Practical Reason" (1993) in which he focuses his attention to rationality of transition from one position to another in a case of actual persons committed to a certain view or conception. Taylor claims that adequate attention has not been given to practical reasoning of *ad hominem*¹³⁴ character which he contrasts with *apodeictic* reasoning. *Ad hominem* reasoning starts from the fact of human beings being committed to certain goals, views and conceptions to begin with whereas apodeictic mode of reasoning typically tries to disengage a human being from his held convictions and beliefs about life in order to unburden the rationality to the extent that different notions and conceptions can be rationally evaluated as neutrally as possible. According to Cartesian conception of reasoning, we need self-evident truths to start with after which we have a firm foundation on which to build. (Taylor 1993: 211–3; see also 224–5, 230.)

"Our knowledge claims are to be checked, to be assessed as fully and responsibly as they can be, by breaking them down and identifying their ultimate foundations, as distinct from the chain of inferences which build from these towards our original unreflecting beliefs. This foundationalist model can easily come to be identified with reason itself... from the foundationalist perspective, only apodeictic mode of reasoning is really satisfactory..." (Taylor 1993: 213).

Enlightenment notion of practical reason has certainly its uses in (hopefully) freeing one from parochial perspective by demanding universal principles justified outside one particular, perhaps very conservative, point of view. Nonetheless, I have to agree with

¹³⁴ The way in which Taylor uses the term *ad hominem* should not be confused with a rhetorical argument often characterized as "the personal attack type". Taylor's use is more akin to the Lockean type portrayed by Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* which Douglas Walton calls "argument from commitment" (Walton 2000: 104; for a more comprehensive account of arguments of *ad hominem* type, see Walton 1998). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) have also made this distinction by separating *ad hominem*, which deals with consistency or inconsistency in the beliefs of a particular audience, from *ad personam*, which involves a personal attack intended to discredit an opponent.

Taylor in his assertion that “the belief that a critical morality, by its very nature, rules out the *ad hominem* mode of practical reasoning” forcing us to “recognize the apodeictic mode as the only game in town” is deeply mistaken. (ibid. 214.) At the root of the problem lies a deeply held assumption that, when assessing merits of two different moral conceptions, what the argument needs are ‘criteria’ for these conceptions through which to assess the relevant merits of the conceptions, the criteria which are sufficient to show that one of the conceptions is right while the other is wrong.

Before going further with the presentation of *ad hominem* argumentation, a brief remark in relation to the theory of essentially contested concepts must be made. In the course of elaborating the conditions (II) and (III) of Gallie’s original thesis I introduced William Connolly’s interpretation of the thesis, namely the addition of the notion of criteria of a concept for which different weight is ascribed according to particular normative frameworks of an individual. The sense in which the criteria are needed in the apodeictic mode of reasoning illustrated above is that they provide a neutral standpoint from which to evaluate the conceptions whereas the criteria Connolly talks about are formed from a subjective perspective which arguably can have a lot in common with subjective perspectives of other people depending on to what extent the concept (or the conception of concept) in question is shared. This is the difference which, ultimately, makes essential contestability theses compatible with *ad hominem* reasoning.

Charles Taylor focuses on ‘transition’ between certain conceptions making it an issue of comparative judgment. Rival positions are checked against the facts i.e. their respective performance is considered as a matter of how they face the reality. The emphasis on the transition has an upshot of making sense how rival positions *deal with each other* in addition to how they *deal with facts*. Taylor takes under scrutiny an example offered by Alasdair MacIntyre¹³⁵, the move from Renaissance sub-Aristotelian views to Galilean theories of motion, as a striking case of how a latter theory—even if the terminology of that theory is, along with its basic assumptions, non-intertranslatable in relation to the former—can elucidate the problematics of the former theory in a way of making sense of them in addition of being a clear improvement in other respects. “This show an asymmetrical relation between them: you can move from Aristotle to Galileo realizing a gain in understanding, but not vice versa”. (ibid. 216–217.) The matter here is not simply characterized as one of theoretical practicality, however, for a pre-Galilean

¹³⁵ In section 3.4 I will characterize MacIntyre’s position concerning historical traditions in relation to the broader framework of this thesis.

person is operating “with a quite different paradigm of understanding, to which manipulative capacity is irrelevant”, namely the purpose of “physics” for her is to discover one’s proper place in the cosmos in a meaningful way, a matter which is not self-evidently realized in modern technological civilization. Each theory has its own built-in criteria of success that relate to the understanding sought as relevant i.e. to what is the overall purpose of the theory. In the case of Platonic-Aristotelian tradition the criteria of success relate to “moral vision and attunement” whereas post-Galilean understanding seeks “manipulative power”. What we are lacking here, Taylor claims, are criteria: “there are no decisive considerations which *both* sides must accept”. (ibid. 218–9.)

This kind of stand-off resembles the one I have identified in the case of essentially contestable concepts. Since there are no decisive criteria as objective standards of evaluation to be found, we are in a situation in which we must conclude that either 1) the participants in a dispute must have some criteria common to both for the dispute not to be pointless or a confused one, or 2) the situation is characterized as one of deep incommensurability rendering the dispute unsettlable which in turn makes any attempt to have a rational conversation impossible. If one sees different conceptions as locked in an eternal struggle, the challenge a relativist can poise surely looks an insurmountable one in the second case. On the other hand, the first alternative doesn’t seem to fare any better; to assume that to be a case, the hope for trying to understand conceptions dissimilar to one’s own is slim, the hope for finding strong justifications for any such view almost non-existent. That is, if we assume *the criteria outside conceptions themselves are what we need*¹³⁶. In section 3.1 I argued that the moral point of view provides a rationale for grouping various criteria together in a case of a single concept. Now I will claim that the moral point of view (one could call it social or political point of view as well) provides a rationale for individual conversion from one view to another.

Taylor argues convincingly that there does not need to be any specific *anomaly* bringing about the “defeat” of one conception but there can be something which the

¹³⁶ In a rather ironical twist of history the emphasis on one’s ability to reason universally typical to Cartesian project and subsequent Enlightenment has generated more suspicion about one’s ability to reason in a foundationalist way than ever before. By detaching rationality from actual comprehensive accounts of man’s relation to the world “the canonical, foundationalist notion of arbitrating disputes through criteria generates skepticism about reason, which disappears once we see that we are often arguing about transitions” (Taylor 1993: 220). This skepticism is “perfected” in the works of Nietzsche who took Cartesian methodological skepticism to its extreme, or, as Paul Ricoeur succinctly characterizes the difference between these famous “doubters”: “In the same way that Descartes’s doubt proceeded from the presumed absence of distinction between dreaming and waking, that of Nietzsche proceeds from the even more hyperbolic absence between lies and truth” (Ricoeur 1992: 13).

vanquished theory should have taken into account lying outside the scope of its original standards; in the case of Platonic-Aristotelian tradition that something was that the success of mechanistic science posed a problem (for the theory that went before it).

“If we ask why this is so, we are led to recognize a human constant, namely, a mode of understanding of a given domain D, which consists in our ability to make our way about and effect our purposes in D. We might borrow a term from Heidegger, and call this understanding as we originally have it prior to explication or scientific discovery ‘pre-understanding’. One of the directions of increasing knowledge of which we are capable consists in making this pre-understanding explicit, and then in extending our grasp of the connections which underlies our ability to deal with the world as we do” (ibid. 220).

According to Taylor there exists a certain link to be perceived between a practical capacity and an understanding which is “deeply embedded in the human life form” (ibid. 221). The task is not to convince someone who holds one conception (thought as a first principle of a kind) steadfastly, undividedly and unconfusedly. Rather, as is the case with a pre-Galilean, we have to show that an adherent of an earlier conception couldn’t undividedly and unconfusedly *repudiate* the deliverance of a new conception which has succeeded in enhancing the practical capacity of individuals in a way that is compatible with the pre-understanding of those individuals. Thus, one is not appealing to independent criteria outside the framework of the “old” conception, or outside the one replacing the earlier, but to one’s implicit understanding of one’s own form of life. The case should not be characterized as a radical conversion from one ultimate premise to another, according to Taylor, that would indeed be irrational (*ceteris paribus*). “On the standard foundationalist view, the protagonists are seen as closed explicit systems... But the real positions held in history do not correspond to these water-tight deductive systems, and that is why rational transitions are in fact possible” (ibid. 221).

We have already seen that, in the case of certain group of concepts which Gallie labeled “essentially contested”, clear and explicit definitions with fixed sets of criteria are confoundingly hard to articulate for the concept’s criteria seem to “spill out” to span the definitions and criteria of other concepts similarly hard to articulate. Various sets of conceptions, consisting partly of these elusive concepts, held by different people are not any easier to treat since to evaluate held convictions and beliefs of a particular person is to make a statement about her personal understanding in a larger scheme of things i.e. of the way she personally “carves” the social reality. To claim that the particular acquired set of

conceptions is irrationally held would seem to be a case of succumbing to the chronic human peril of underestimating the value of one's opponent's views, indeed. To focus one's attention to the transition from one conception to another instead of comparing conceptions in a timeless manner has several benefits. First of all, it helps us to realize why the "wrong" conception is held at all by emphasizing the significance of practical capacity in relation to one's particular form of life. Secondly, it renders the conversion from one view to another intelligible as a matter of enhancing one's practical capacity in life—the goal surely rational for every human being as far as we currently conceive what it is to be a human. And last, assuming a notion of rationality closely tied to transitions we may have *prima facie* reasons to treat others with more respect; as rational beings nothing more or nothing less than ourselves¹³⁷.

For assessing the rationality of the personal conversion Taylor's model of practical reasoning is highly suitable also because it seems to go rather well with phenomenological experiences I claim most people to have. Consider the following:

"The transition from *X* to *Y* is not shown to be a gain because this is the only way to make sense of the key consideration: rather it is shown to be a gain directly, because it can plausibly be described as mediated by some error-reducing move. This third mode of argument can be said to reverse the direction of argument. The canonical, foundationalist form can only show that the transition from *X* to *Y* is a gain in knowledge by showing that, say, *X* is false and *Y* true, or *X* has probability *n*, and *Y* has $2n$ But consider the possibility that we might identify the transition directly as the overcoming of an error... Instead of concluding that *Y* is a gain over *X* because of the superior performance of *Y*, we could be confident of the superior performance of *Y* because we know that *Y* is a gain over *X*" (ibid. 223).

Taylor sees that the rationality of transition can be viewed as a matter of two different perspectives that can be taken regarding the issue: the superiority of "latter" conception can be seen as a definite gain from its own perspective, but not necessarily from the perspective of "former" conception (even though the practical capacities possibly gained by adopting the new conception—that cannot be attained by holding to the old conception—may prove to be too substantial to ignore). The judgment made in this picture is still grounded in the differential performance of the conceptions in question, a view which is too much alike with foundationalist form of argument, as far as Taylor is

¹³⁷ I feel the need to stress, however, that the third beneficial consequence identified is not necessary to view the overall conception advocated by me as plausible. These sorts of ethical implications can be drawn only *prima facie*, perhaps, even, only by those already willing to subscribe to them.

concerned. The asymmetricality between the conceptions is in plain sight but the rationality is conceived still as differential. (ibid. 223.)

In the case of biographical transitions—with which I am mostly concerned in this section—we can consider the transition itself as self-justifying, as a move which is by its very nature error-reducing. Taylor offers an example in which “Joe” is uncertain whether he loves “Anne”, because of a resentment he feels towards her. He is confused about the whole situation since he assumes that love (as a feeling) is incompatible with resentment. But he comes to see that these two actually are compatible emotions with each other in a way that one is not trumping the other. “Joe is confident that his present self-reading (I certainly love Anne) is superior to his former self-reading (I’m not sure whether I love Anne), because he knows that he passed from one to the other via the clarification of a confusion, that is, by a move which is in its very nature error-reducing” (ibid. 224). How typical is the picture presented by Taylor? For once, it is somewhat clear that at least a similar kind of logic is at play in all cases of biographical “moral growth”. The example of a person checking his conceptual map touched upon in section 3.2 is a clear example of this kind of process. Since he does not have two different conceptual maps by which to navigate an unknown terrain, he checks his map constantly along the way hoping to solve his confusion about the correct way to a destination. When a clear path emerges as an alternative it is seen as a rational to follow it. It might be that he is lost along the way, but that is the predicament he is in, he has no other choice. The asymmetricality perceived earlier is reflected on a personal level as an impossibility to turn back time.

Taylor claims that the same form is applicable to the situations of interpersonal argument. From an inescapably limited perspective one can offer an (moral, political or social) interpretation of a situation (concerning one person or a group of persons or even a society as a whole) which can bring about the self-justifying transition in other interlocutor. For Taylor, this is “the commonest form of practical reasoning in our lives”.

“But this is a form of argument where the appeal to criteria or even to the differential performance of the rival views in relation to some decisive consideration, is quite beside the point. The transition is justified by the very nature of the move which effects it. Here the *ad hominem* argument is at its most intense, and its most fruitful” (ibid. 225).

The basic point Taylor is making is that, although transitional arguments can be seen as offering a definite gain as a reason to rational conversion, they are also *ad hominem* i.e. directed to the persons holding some conceptions already. These type of

arguments offer a much more modest claim than foundational ones in virtue of being inherently comparative. “The claim is not that *Y* is correct *simpliciter*, but simply that, whatever is ‘ultimately’ true, *Y* is better than *X*” (ibid. 225). This is a plausible claim, in my opinion, since to adopt it one does not have to put one’s hands up in exasperation and commit to some form of agnostic relativism as a starting position, while it univocally rejects the model of reasoning according to which one must be capable of distinguishing reason from “everything else” in order to be a rational being with justified reasons for actions. It is a humble position to take since no conception conceived serves as the ultimate resting point for inquiry, and thus, it is compatible with a thesis of essential contestability that does not try to deny the notion of superiority and takes seriously phenomenological experiences and the requirement for historical understanding.

3.4 Rationality within and between traditions

By now I hope to have made it clear how one can deem the conversion from one view to another as a rational move at a personal level even in the circumstances that do not warrant oneself to believe one particular judgment on the matter (contested) to be true in a once-and-for-all sense¹³⁸. Next I take under scrutiny the historicist view presented by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) concerning the place of traditions in our overall thinking. My purpose is to frame the issue in a way that is compatible with the argument made in the current chapter earlier, namely the claim that the concept of identity is at the crux of the two at least seemingly different perspectives to the world: the personal outlook to life and the general world views both of which seem to impose us a set of requirements quite different when considered from a phenomenological standpoint. The specific goal in this section is to evaluate the interplay of traditions through the lenses of the conception of transitional rationality proposed previously. In the end, I also briefly point to an avenue for seeing the conceptual frameworks provided by traditions as non-incommensurable.

¹³⁸ The need to even assess the truthfulness or correctness of conceptions in “once-and-for-all-sense” is something inherently typical to apodeictic reasoning. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the apodeictic reasoning has its uses as well even in the everyday lives of individuals hoping to make sense of the world but I do not see it as the right kind of standard (even if thought as regulative) by which to assess the rationality of personal transitions.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) MacIntyre focuses on the question of rational justification for any view or theory to the extent that different traditions of thought are concerned¹³⁹. His main point is nicely illustrated in the following quote:

“Each tradition can at each stage of its development provide rational justification for its central theses in its own terms, employing the concepts and standards by which it defines itself, but there is no set of independent standards of rational justification by appeal to which the issues between contending traditions can be decided” (MacIntyre 1988: 351).

Thus, MacIntyre views traditions as a succession of stages for each of which justifications can be offered in terms found within the tradition itself. Competing (intellectual) traditions quite possibly share *some* standards but it is often the case that what is shared is not sufficient to provide enough common ground to resolve disagreements between adherents of various traditions (ibid. 351). MacIntyre sees each particular rational enquiry, a tradition, as beginning “in and from some condition of pure historical contingency, from the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community which constitute a given” (ibid. 354). Enquiry in itself is both “tradition-constituted” and “tradition-constitutive”. What is important to realize is that, even though authority has been conferred upon certain texts or voices within a community, the community is always in a state of change. It is plausible to assume that different interpretations on the original authority or authorities emerge when those claiming allegiance to a certain tradition face new situations or are confronted by unforeseen circumstances to which original formulation of a belief system cannot provide adequate resources to deal with. The needed changes to an original belief system should not be thought only in intellectual terms but “as that through which thinking individuals relate themselves to each other and to natural and social objects as these present themselves to them” (ibid. 355).

“We are now in a position to contrast three stages in the initial development of a tradition: a first in which the relevant beliefs, texts and authorities have not yet been put in question; a second in which inadequacies of various types have been identified, but not yet remedied; and a third in which response to those inadequacies has resulted in a set

¹³⁹ All in all, it can be argued that the overall philosophical project of MacIntyre is mostly focused on the question of relativism, and more specifically “with problems generated by the differences between “incommensurable” conceptual schemes, alternative systems of belief, and incompatible ways of life” (Baynes et al. 1987: 381). That makes his contribution to the matter especially suitable for the purposes of my study.

of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations” (ibid. 355).

What makes a tradition *rational* i.e. what the requirements are for even to conceive it as the one and same tradition, is that “some core of shared belief, constitutive of allegiance to the tradition, has to survive every rupture” (ibid. 356). Indeed, there must be an element of continuity to be found in development of tradition for it to meaningfully be a tradition at all. However, it would be a misunderstanding to assume a content of a core to be some sort of set of prepositions providing a firm foundation for a tradition—although that can be the case as well. It is conceivable that tradition can consist of several epistemological assumptions concerning a preferred methodology intertwined with social and political assumptions (of often ideological nature) without there being even an exemplar in a form of (collection of) texts or sacred¹⁴⁰.

The key point underlined by MacIntyre is that, during the stages of a tradition, followers of the tradition become able to contrast their new beliefs with the old perceiving the old conceptions as false or misguided. He claims that this should be viewed as a failure of the mind rather than its objects that stands in a need of correction. The presupposed conception of the mind is not Cartesian mind doing the reflection in a vacuum independently but that of the mind as “engaging with the natural and social world in such activities as identification, reidentification, collecting, separating, classifying, and all this by touching, grasping, pointing, breaking down, building up, calling to, answering to, and so on¹⁴¹” (ibid. 356). The falsity of previous conceptions is “recognized retrospectively as a past inadequacy” in a manner of not comparing the conceptions to the objective world as

¹⁴⁰ As far as intellectual traditions are concerned, this could be the case more often than not. For instance, ‘positivism’ seems to be a tradition of this sort; certain methodological similarities can be perceived in works of “positivists” although no single binding set of principles has gathered univocal support within the tradition. Curiously, MacIntyre himself is most often dubbed as a “communitarian”, as is Charles Taylor, although both of them have never felt comfortable with the label (and especially with the descriptions that go with it). Be that as it may, both are generally acknowledged to be part of intellectual tradition called ‘communitarianism’ to which they have also provided its general outlines. This goes on to show that, rather ironically, the founders of one or another intellectual tradition may have no say about the interpretations made by subsequent “followers” or “outsiders”. Generally speaking, the fact that traditions are embraced as well as “projected” complicates the process of identifying traditions accurately.

¹⁴¹ This conception of a mind is notably similar to the one I have embraced in this chapter. It corresponds, not surprisingly, also rather well with the conception of Taylor presented in the previous section. In this respect, the following quote by MacIntyre is to the point: “One of the great originating insights of tradition-constituted enquiries is that false beliefs and false judgments represent a failure of the mind, not of its objects. It is mind which stands in need of correction. Those realities which mind encounters reveal themselves as they are, the presented, the manifest, the unhidden. So the most primitive conception of truth is of the manifestness of the objects which present themselves to mind; and it is when mind fails to re-present that manifestness that falsity, the inadequacy of mind to its objects, appears” (MacIntyre 1988: 357; see also follow-up in 357–8 and the discussion about “timelessness” of truth in 362–4).

such i.e. as separate propositions taken apart from the background assumptions held by adherents of given tradition, but as a perceived failure of past conceptions to correspond with the reality when compared to a new understanding. There may be a time when the supporters of a tradition are at loss, so to speak, meaning that they perceive the inadequacies but not the remedies, as identified by MacIntyre, but the following “remedies” proposed do not usually start from a scratch. It is certainly possible that the complete overhaul of system of beliefs may be necessary—and in some of these cases we may see a start of a new tradition—but it is important to realize the nature of the enquiry needed: it attempts to answer for the failures of the old tradition while providing an avenue for further enquiry. (ibid. 356–8.)

“The identification of incoherence within established belief will always provide a reason for enquiring further, but not in itself a conclusive reason for rejecting established belief, until something more adequate because less incoherent has been discovered. At every stage beliefs and judgments will be justified by reference to the beliefs and judgments of the previous stage, and insofar as a tradition has constituted itself as a successful form of enquiry, the claims to truth made within that tradition will always be in some specifiable way less vulnerable to dialectical questioning and objection than were their predecessors” (ibid. 359)¹⁴².

MacIntyre has now introduced an idea of progressive development within a specific tradition made possible by the assumption that each tradition provides rational justification for its central theses in its own terms. Because every tradition is based on its particular, although possibly vague, background assumptions the issues and questions relevant to that tradition are produced within the tradition in question. The answers “will compete rationally, just insofar as they are tested dialectically in order to discover which is the best answer to be proposed so far”. It is likely that some questions and problematics encountered are not specific to one tradition only but are debated within some other tradition. The identification of this state of affairs is “recognized as the same in the light of the standards internal to this particular tradition” which may eventually develop “defined areas of agreement and disagreement with such an other tradition”. The rational justification of any given tradition is “at once dialectical and historical”, meaning that it is

¹⁴² As it happens, I argue that from the view point of transitional rationality my account of essential contestability is superior to Gallie’s because it promises a more nuanced approach to the phenomenon of essential contestability and increased capacity to handle the issues involved with at least a glimmer of hope of plausibly describing those concerns. However, it would be a grievous mistake to assert that this is a best conception possible in once-and-for-all sense. The reason is not the lack of humility but an informed theoretical point of view to issues of this nature, one which is characterized by MacIntyre in the quote.

justified in a course of surviving the process of questioning vindicating itself as superior to its predecessor. Nonetheless, “no one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgments being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways”¹⁴³ (ibid. 358, 360–1.)

MacIntyre’s view on the character of rationality of traditions fits very well with the idea of essential contestability. Indeed, there are many historical examples available of various traditions “living side by side” without being able to reconcile their basic differences without a remainder even though there are undeniable elements of rationality to be found in each¹⁴⁴. The fundamental point sought by W.B. Gallie was to show that there are genuine disputes that are perfectly reasonable despite their pervasiveness to be found. When we consider competing traditions each with its sets of background presuppositions, criteria of relevancy, authoritative examples and criteria of justification, it is easy to see how the disagreements between adherents of various traditions might be considered as evidencing essential contestability. Moreover, MacIntyre seems to be on the right track in arguing that no *adherent of a single tradition* can ever rule out the inadequacy of their particular views in the future. The perspective from which we try to conceive the issue is highly important. Even though one who is committed to certain view cannot know for sure that the future generations wouldn’t rule his views as false and inadequate, he is still committed to them personally claiming a correspondence with the state of affairs (social, political, moral etc.) in the world he perceives to be a superior to older conception(s). The conception elaborated is historical in character and parallel to the one presented earlier in sections 3.2 and 3.3 in the case of an individual seeing his own life as a continuum or narrative that has led him to a particular point in life. The conception thus presented is not relativistic since the relative nature of it is transformed as relational when historical perspective is considered. It is seen as relativistic only when Cartesian requirement of self-evident truths is taken as a standard for the evaluation of rationality of conceptions in

¹⁴³ Thus, it seems likely that MacIntyre would not refute the notion of universality as emerging out of the particular in quite a similar way as Ernesto Laclau has portrayed the issue (cf. fn. 99 in section 2.9). The plausibility of this particular kind of take on ‘progressive development’ is evaluated in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012).

¹⁴⁴ For example, the medieval legal tradition in Europe was a curious concoction of at least three distinctive traditions living side by side: Roman, Christian and local “laws”. The actual conception of law applied in different regions was usually a pragmatic compromise between the demands of each. Despite the different, often incompatible, demands all three traditions persisted quite some time.

question¹⁴⁵. That kind of conception of human being as disintressed and disenchanted being—despite its apparent popularity after Enlightenment—is highly implausible account of what is going on when actual human beings try to evaluate life and its phenomena rationally with the resources they have.

In section 2.5 I presented a broader reading of Gallie’s original exemplar alluding to a possibility of seeing it as a tradition of thought. After (briefly) treating MacIntyre’s notions about the nature of enquiry as tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive, it becomes clear that ‘tradition’ can indeed serve as a kind of ‘exemplar’ socially determining the range of forms of life available for individuals and communities to choose from¹⁴⁶. However, it seems to do so in virtue of incorporating the standards of rationality within which the tradition itself becomes intelligible and, at the same time, open to further criticism. These “standards of rationality” within a tradition determine the range of questions that can be asked within said tradition and the relevancy of the answers given to those questions. This is shown especially well in the case of philosophical traditions which tend to treat the questions presented within some single realm of thought as relevant even though all of human thought cannot be organized into a comprehensive and coherent whole¹⁴⁷. It might just be that the fundamental difference between natural and social

¹⁴⁵ This is tied to the notion presented by Taylor above. Apodeictic reasoning evident in Cartesian thought requires one to present a set of criteria outside the particular bounds of one’s concrete social situation which, in turn, relativizes the significance of that particularity to begin with. This is true with more ideological constructions based on the same logic of reasoning as well. For example, ‘liberalism’, or at least some strands of it, can arguably be portrayed as a tradition of thought that attempts to mitigate the perceived destabilizing effects other traditions of thought may impose on the social stability of society. The key point worth emphasizing is that ‘liberalism’ can have this regulating function only if other traditions are evaluated and “put to their proper place” by the set of criteria found outside them. Whereas apodeictic reasoning is supposed to be “the only game in town” (to quote Taylor), the liberal tradition has the same practical effect in straightforwardly replacing other traditions or simply attesting its supremacy as the general structure within which “merely particular” traditions coexist. Hobbesian Leviathan makes a triumphant return in another guise. I guess MacIntyre had something like this in mind when he remarks that “modern liberalism, born of antagonism to all tradition, has transformed itself gradually into what is now clearly recognizable even by some of its adherents as one more tradition... Because every such rational tradition begins from the contingency and positivity of some set of established beliefs, the rationality of tradition is inescapably anti-Cartesian” (MacIntyre 1988: 10; 360). See also MacIntyre’s reasoning why he thinks tradition-constituted enquiry as anti-Hegelian as well (ibid. 360–1).

¹⁴⁶ In section 2.7 I concluded that, from the two options available, linguistic autonomy and social determination, that can be seen as the source for essential contestability in general, we would be well advised to concentrate on the latter one if we wanted to avoid embracing conceptual relativism while retaining the insight between the idea of essential contestability. If MacIntyre’s view about traditions is taken as given, it is hard to see how one could form a thesis of essential contestability as based on the notion of linguistic autonomy since it is somewhat antithetical to a notion of social determination (of any degree).

¹⁴⁷ This seems to be even truer with the advent of phenomenological conceptualizations (as a distinguished separate field) which seem to guarantee (at least for the foreseeable future) that no aggregation of empirical knowledge is enough to “challenge” phenomenology in its own terrain.

sciences can be seen *merely* as a matter of how many different starting points for enquiry constituted by traditions there are available.

There are certain consequences for assuming the sort of dependency between ‘tradition’ and ‘rationality’. A first, it renders historical context as conceptually linked with the aspect of being human I call *social condition*. Whereas *human condition* is best seen as a set of those characteristics without which we could not begin to think a particular human being as belonging to the group of human beings in general, social condition is a set of more contingent characteristics. As a rudimentary example of the difference between the two we could state that, even if we could not conceive an individual who has no capacity for self-reflection¹⁴⁸ to really be a human being (human condition), we can clearly conceive a human being who, when looking at a starry sky sees embodiments of gods or supernatural beings in constellations and has realigned oneself and one’s place in the world accordingly (social condition). If we see rationality as tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive we have no problem to call the latter person “rational”, although we prefer our own understanding of the physical world (with or without more secular notions). This goes well with an intuitive fact commonsensically taken for granted that there have been rational persons in the course of history and there will be some in the future as well—even if the views of those, who have been here before us, and of those, who are yet to come, have been and will be different from the notions we currently subscribe to.

The perspective seeing standards of rationality as incorporated into traditions is not without its problems either. If the process of enquiry begins and ends within a tradition utilizing standards of rationality fundamentally intertwined with that tradition, how can one compare the merits of different traditions or even understand what the other tradition is trying to say and achieve with its own particular enquiry? The situation is much simpler in cases illustrating assumed progress *within* a tradition since we can somewhat safely presume that adherents of the same tradition do indeed share the standards of enquiry to the extent that subsequent alterations can explain previously confronted problems using a language congruent with the rational self-understanding of the tradition. If, however, we assume that there are two different traditions each of which employs its own standards of rationality in order to evaluate the progress made within its own tradition as well as appraising the merits of other tradition, we can easily arrive at a situation, in which these

¹⁴⁸ I have no desire (or ability) to list necessary or sufficient characteristics of human beings in a way that we could answer for the questions such as “is the hospitalized patient with no brain activity a human being?”.

two traditions are seen as deeply incommensurable i.e. the traditions cannot be judged, measured or considered comparatively. Are we at the dead end?

It is important to realize that adherents of a tradition can and do, in fact, compare different traditions with each other; they do so from the perspective of their own tradition—from which other conceptions are often deemed as false. *Incommensurability emerges only in the situations in which one attempts to take a neutral view point outside both traditions.* In this type of situation the first question to be asked should not be “which tradition is correct?”, rather, one has to *translate* claims of each tradition to a language that is capable of encompassing substantive concerns and achievements of both traditions. It is a central presumption in this thesis that one can evaluate various concepts, claims or phenomena only from/within a certain framework of interpretation—a rather commonsensical assumption—which, due to the nature of socio-political concepts and social phenomena, is normative in a sense of being composed of normative commitments (tied to the identity formation and personal outlook on life as a matter of continued narrative formed pragmatically). In section 3.1 and I argued that the moral point of view cannot be subtracted from the evaluation of social and political concepts as it provides a rationale for grouping certain criteria under a rubric of a concept. The evaluative perspective outside two or more different traditions—if seriously hoping to translate the relevant concerns of traditions—must have a capacity to preserve moral rationale for grouping the criteria together, hence it has to approach the evaluation from a moral point of view. The other alternative would be to assume counter-intuitively that even if conceptions within a tradition can only be expressed from a moral point of view (or through a normative framework of interpretation) the position of an interpreter when evaluating different traditions, none of which he himself is personally committed to, is fundamentally different. It may be that a person who has “less stakes” in a debate or conflict between adherents of different traditions can offer a view point less prone to underestimating the value and merit of conception(s) professed by opposing parties, but there is no reason to think that the situation is therefore fundamentally different conceptually. If the moral point of view is needed regardless of one’s position in relation to conflicting views, there is no reason to assume that “a third party” would be able to transcend the limitations imposed by the standards of evaluation as tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive rationality. If the contrary would be possible, we would be able to produce a language able to translate social, political and moral concerns in a neutral fashion, an avenue that seems highly unlikely. Thus, incommensurability is perceived when standards of rationality immanent

within traditions or sets of conceptions are not translatable to a sufficient degree by the perspective with its own standards of rationality. Interpretation is *in effect* an act of translation making it sensible to speak of normative frameworks of translation instead of interpretation although no definite *distinguo* is needed as they seem to be two aspects or modes of the same process.

‘Translation’ is a highly important theoretical concept since it ruptures a conception according to which only that which is shared (in a strict sense of being equivalent) is understandable. In the case of concepts, it is often assumed¹⁴⁹ that for two people to have an understanding about the same concept, 1) the held conceptions of the concept must have *a common core*, 2) there must be some *criteria* of the concept that are commonly shared, or 3) people having a debate must share *standards of evaluation* (usually standards of rationality) so that they can make sense whether they speak about the same concept in the end. Let’s say that there are four persons who hold different views about an activity they see as worth their admiration: the person A admires ice-hockey, the person B appreciates wrestling, the person C thinks highly of theater while the person D enjoys reality-TV. A(ice hockey) holds a conviction that wrestling is not “a sport” while understanding the passion of C for theater. B appreciates the physical aspect of ice hockey and an entertainment factor of reality-TV while not comprehending what C sees in theater as a worthwhile activity. The appreciations of C and D are similarly in conflict with others (the exact way of how is not relevant here). How can these people proceed in finding a common ground? At first, they may try to convince others of the merits of their own reasons and criteria for admiration. It might be that some are swayed as a result, but let us assume that this does not happen in this case. They may also agree to disagree which, despite its sensibility, is not an alternative we are interested here. Certainly, it is hard to find a plausible common core of these different appreciations which would give a rise to greater understanding. It is also quite difficult in to find shared criteria that would enable greater appreciation of the views of others. For example, C’s proposition that all these activities have a common criterion of “giving enjoyment through a sense of perception” is immediately rejected by others as irrelevant in its generality and misguided since not all agree that all these activities are enjoyable. But what if B introduces an idea that the common ground for all these activities is that they are “spectacles”? Let’s also assume that all participants in the discussion have a conceptual capacity to see the activities in question

¹⁴⁹ Though, it must be clarified, not by me.

as “spectacles”, and worth of admiration for that reason. “Hmm, I haven’t thought it that way,” D may say “but I think you are on the right track in your assessment why we all love these activities”; A and C voice their agreement as well. Is agreement a case of one of the three alternatives (common core, shared criteria, standards of evaluation) presented before?

It seems that the participants of the discussion have gained some common ground on which to build further understanding. After this “breakthrough” it is certainly possible that they find even more in common with each other. However, the situation is not best characterizable as finding a common core or criterion, not even as finding shared standards of evaluation. What has actually happened is that B has accomplished to describe the situation in terms that each can agree upon. It is plausible that other such descriptions would have been possible as well, for example, she may have proposed that all these things are “plays” in more than one sense of the word. Nonetheless, what is most important is that all participants have common conceptual language to understand the situation variously even if their convictions about “worthwhileness” of the activities would remain unchanged now and in the future. They still have their own particular and substantive standards of evaluation. The use of common language with its substantive (and contingent) historical background makes it possible to characterize the situation in acceptable terminology which does not automatically result in new and better definitions transforming the particular conceptions of the disputants.

In the case of traditions it is easy to see similar progressions throughout the history. What made Cicero’s work so remarkable was his ability to use the language of Latin in such an innovative way that he was able to translate the concerns of Ancient Greeks to another language while neologizing Latin at the same time¹⁵⁰. Of course, how well he really succeeded in this is a matter of interpretation. The relevant point I’m attempting to make here is to see our modern-day languages as formed out of several historical traditions. In various stages of its development a great many concerns have been characterized through an innovative use of language producing the language that is conceptually very rich. Certain asymmetricality is evident: while we have a conceptual arsenal to characterize the concerns of Cicero, with Cicero’s Latin one cannot characterize the concerns of today. Does this mean that we can understand everything that has gone before us? No, of course not, but at least we are able to trace those concerns meaningfully and even begin to understand them.

¹⁵⁰ This is an example offered by MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988: 372–3).

If we see modern-day languages as a product of historical contingencies it is plausible to see the standards of rationality following in suit. Yet again, Enlightenment looks to be a watershed in this respect¹⁵¹. The standards of rationality employed by the thinkers of that era made it possible to evaluate everything in unproblematic fashion through the use of one's (pure) reason. New conceptual arsenal was needed, and by this I do not mean to imply that "first there was an idea, then became a need, thus, a new conceptual apparatus was formed". This sort of question of primacy is misleading. What is more important is the apparent fact that with this new conceptual apparatus—seasoned with an assumption that one must start the reasoning process without prior convictions—made it possible to relativize different conceptions and traditions as "particular" instead of "unique", but because of that particularity as hopelessly biased, as one among many. Since everything can be assessed through universal reasoning, nothing can be "unique" in its exact sense as "without equal or like; unparalleled". That also meant the downgrading of historical understanding—understood as making sense of succession of unique events, diachrony—producing curious concoctions like 'historicism' of late 19th to the first half of 20th century according to which historical events should be, and could be, described "as they happened". In the case of social, political and moral matters it has relativized, for example, a concept of 'commitment' through and through.

The notion of translation by itself implicates an attempt to transform relevant considerations (whether they are linguistic, social etc.) of the matter to another language capable of presenting them sufficiently. 'Translation' is a particularly fit concept for expressing a substantive assertion that the point of interpretation process is not to compare the correctness of two or more conceptions directly as if one could view them as separate and directly comparable with each other in a neutral fashion without a mediating language, framework or perspective—i.e. from a neutral third person perspective. When we recall that the social and political concepts tend to be intertwined with other such concepts when their criteria are explicated—the articulated criteria typically include other perhaps equally

¹⁵¹ *Begriffsgeschichte* theorists, focusing almost solely on the conceptual history of German speaking world, are famous of identifying *Sattelzeit* period, roughly from 1750 to 1850, when certain fundamental changes in the conceptual arsenal were perceived to have happened (Richter 1995). Reinhardt Koselleck notes that approximately at that time various "isms" were introduced (republicanism, liberalism, socialism etc.) that replaced the previous concepts in place from Aristotle to the Enlightenment, political concepts that served primarily "to collect experiences and develop them theoretically" (Koselleck 2002: 128). New horizon of 'expectation' was necessary in order to not only collect past experiences but to evaluate by the use of one's reason what it is to be done in the future as well. "Political and social concepts have become the navigational instruments of the changing movement of history. They do not only indicate or record given facts. They themselves become factors in the formation of consciousness and the control of behavior" (ibid. 129).

controversial terms that require explanation in turn—it seems that the analogy about learning a second first language as a requirement for being able to translate relevant concerns from one language to another illustrated by MacIntyre (ibid. 364–7; 370–388) holds somewhat true for all conceptual translations. When “truly” learning a second first language—to understand nuances of a language, not just its most basic expressions—one must focus his attention on the overall culture in which that language is spoken. I am now talking about everyday expressions formed in numerous ways. For example, some expressions and terms may hold non-textbook meanings and connotations, whose origin is in popular TV- game shows, ads and comedies, in speeches of populist politicians, in past history of that given culture, in stories of nation’s famous athletes, in mythical characterizations of typical members of that culture etc. Redick and Underwood (2007) have characterized the situation I’m referring to as ‘narrative field’¹⁵². Whatever the term we want to use it is clear that to understand a specific expression, one must understand a language; and to understand a language, one must understand a culture (and/or history). Social and political concepts follow a similar pattern: to understand a concept, one must understand other concepts linked to it in a conceptual framework; to understand a conceptual framework, one must understand a tradition (or a culture, narrative field etc.) in which a conceptual framework is given its specific form along with substantive definitions of concepts. Internally complex character of many social and political concepts is always appraised in a twofold sense: as a matter of personal outlook and as a matter of general world views given their substance by certain tradition(s). These two perspectives entail a difference in a sense that the substance of the one pole cannot be compared directly to the other. Translation, then, must also take place “inside one’s head”. Most of the times we do

¹⁵² For example, Redick and Underwood point out that “For rational creatures, the genesis of sentience lies in the nexus of rationality and narrative. They must coexist to foster cognizance and personhood. ...it is the narrative that provides the field in which symbolic meaning rises. Rationality is working in the shifting gestalt, but does not precede it. There are essential aspects of reasoning that cannot be captured independently of the context in which they are conceived and presented. In short, an adequate account of the argumentative mode of reasoning cannot be constructed without reference to narrative” (Redick and Underwood 2007: 398; 404). Despite the fact that Alasdair MacIntyre has been perhaps the most influential exponent of the idea that narratives are fundamentally connected to the ethical nature of man, the concept ‘narrative’ is conspicuously absent in the present study although some thought have been given to identity formation and forms of life. The reason for that is mostly economic, I will discuss the matter in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012). Regarding the above mentioned notion by Redick and Underwood I must note that, despite the rather controversial ideas they advocate, the connections between ‘rationality’ and ‘narrative’ should be pursued especially by someone wanting to make a case for essential contestability thesis. Since the thesis of essential contestability cannot be built on a conception which relies on ultimate correctness of respective views, various modes of reasoning and argumentation should occupy a central stage.

not think about it, but sometimes it emerge as a problem when we are confounded by the events and situations we find ourselves in¹⁵³.

3.5 Remarks

In sections 3.1 and 3.2 I have argued for the perspective, crucially different from that of Gallie, according to which the source for essential contestability is found in personal attempts (of intersubjective nature) to make sense of the social world in constant relation to significant others. Identity is basically seen as the locus of meaning in which various considerations about personal life and more general worldviews—both aspects falling under the rubric of ‘form of life’—come together quite probably straining the unity of one’s identity to a considerable degree. Although we can easily conceive a possibility of there being a person with a totally unified identity, along with the normative frameworks that are thoroughly consistent, we are not likely to meet that person during our lives. The situation should not be characterized in a bipolar fashion; the extent to which one’s identity is unified or fragmentary is always a matter of degree. The fact that different times and circumstances place different sort (and strength) of demands to an individual, and consequently to her identity, does little, if anything, to discredit this basic notion despite the certain vagueness of the present characterization of ‘form of life’. That also goes to say that my particular thesis of essential contestability, although perhaps controversial and needing further clarification, is not relativistic.

The specific task undertaken in this chapter was to evaluate whether and how we could consider the conversion from one conception to another as rational. I hope to have done so with the notion of ‘transitional rationality’ presented in section 3.3 and further examined in section 3.4. From a first person perspective the conversion was regarded as a self-justifying and -correcting move in the course of which the new conception was considered (still from a first person perspective) as a practical gain in increased capacity... to make sense of the world, we might add (in the most general of terms). Pictured in this

¹⁵³ The general issues and problematics concerning ‘translation’ cannot be discussed here with a required precision; although one can certainly understand the point of such a notion heuristically it needs further elucidation. It might be fruitful to consider ‘translation’ from the perspective of practical argumentation i.e. the process of translation itself could be seen as a form of argumentation. The basic idea behind such a notion is simple: when a statement or judgment is translated according to one’s normative frameworks to the language of the very same frameworks, it is evaluated in relation to “everything else” within that framework. Thus, as a matter of argumentation, there is no difference between what is “stated by someone” else and what “pops into one’s mind”. The common aspect for both is the necessary evaluation of “the input” within one’s normative frameworks. The devil is yet again in the details, though.

particular way we do not need to ask what motivates the conversion; the motivation and actual conversion is one and the same thing. In the case of traditions, we can see similar kind of logic at work when adherents of a particular tradition are considering the need for further adjustments within the standards provided by the tradition in question. When two (or more) different traditions are in conflict, the situation is slightly altered since the first thing required is to assert the need to translate the claims proposed to particular languages of traditions¹⁵⁴. It is my contention that no neutral language mediating the dispute in uncontroversial way is possible; the process of translation takes place within the normative frameworks provided by one's situation which include one's personal outlook on life, commitments to certain principles and ideals expressed within a particular tradition (or several traditions), and these socially determined particulars compose what we typically refer to as a form of life.

Speaking of socially determined particulars, I view the new framework of essential contestability now developed—within which empirical phenomenon of pervasive disputes characterized by deep contestability is assessed—as one that does not disregard the import of social particulars and empirical questions demanded by Ian Shapiro in section 2.8. On the contrary, the source for contestability is identified as being caused by the deeply held commitments having particular significance for persons trying to make sense of the world in a manner that would preserve the integrity of one's identity to the extent possible in the circumstances requiring one to take a stance. Thus, “agents, actions, legitimacy and ends” (Shapiro 1989) cannot be avoided, even if wanted, in descriptions stemming from my thesis of essential contestability. On the other hand, Norman S. Care's demand to not exaggerate or inflate the thesis of essential contestability (Care 1973) has been met with regard to social particulars (of any kind) in a following way: there is no reason to perceive the dispute at hand as evidencing essential contestability unless the contestation about the social particulars has central significance in defining or marking the

¹⁵⁴ This is, however, only an analytical distinction that is meant to clarify the extent to which these two (within a singular tradition and between several traditions) situations differ from each other. In a non-trivial sense, to interpret is to translate—it is, perhaps, even possible to argue for a notion that to argue practically is to translate since in the course of argumentation different claims are transferred and translated to apply in various situations and within certain contexts. The strength of this claim will be evaluated in “Essential Contestability, Identity and Argumentation” (Pennanen 2012). In all honesty, an additional complication must be pointed out. In the case of particular individuals with identities, the move from one view to another can be viewed from a first person perspective as self-justifying. In the case of traditions, such a first person perspective is not available due to the fact that one must take a third person view which tends to objectify aspects of some tradition as a social entity existing in its own right. While the individual can indeed justify one's views concerning some traditions as rational, if those views seem to offer oneself a better capacity to understand social phenomena, the same recourse is heuristically not plausible enough when traditions conceived as sets of central principles are compared with each other.

contours of the form of life involved in the debate in which the said social particular is contested. I think that this qualification is informative enough without being too strict in defining the range of future contestation of this kind. The research of empirical questions in general and the relevancy of research in other fields of social sciences—for the purpose of expounding the all-important details of contestations given the specific area of interest—is of utmost importance for getting further insight on the issue of essential contestability, as far as I am concerned. Only by diving into the gritty details can we gain an insight on concrete matters related to various forms of life.

Ultimately, the thesis of essential contestability (as it is characterized in the present study) rests on a certain understanding of human condition. Thus, the type of contestation characterized is not a surface disagreement but *structurally necessary*¹⁵⁵ in relation to that understanding, or so I boldly claim. However, more detailed look on the issue is needed. In section 4.2 I list some matters in need of clarification. One definitive weakness the thesis illustrated has, as it stands, is its obscurity concerning some of the theoretical concepts used, for example, ‘translation’. The process of translation between various sets of principles must be articulated much more precisely, so far we have only glimpsed the surface. When one compares or tries to understand in any meaningful way a character and import of a tradition in question, the process never takes place outside all traditions of thought—this was MacIntyre’s central argument—and it cannot be assumed beforehand that all traditions are capable of translating central insights of another tradition

¹⁵⁵ “To say, however, that a concept is essentially contested rather than contestable is to make a claim of a different kind. For if this view is to be consistent it must rest on some claim that locates all meaning outside the concept itself and in society. If the contest is ‘essential’ then it is not the concept that is ‘essentially contested’ but what the concept represents; and this can only be maintained by claiming that some contests are structurally necessary” (Clarke 1979: 124). If it is acknowledged that my thesis of essential contestability depicts contests that are structurally necessary, we could state that the things the concepts represent under dispute are “essentially contested” in the specific sense of essential contestability presented. Because of the evident connotation to the sense of the term meant by Gallie, it is probably best to drop the usage “essentially contested” altogether.

to a language preferred by adherents of the tradition attempting the translation¹⁵⁶, although I see no reason to be pessimistic concerning the matter either. To what extent this leads to incommensurabilities that offer “no way out” is yet unclear.

Perhaps the challenges discussed above should not deter us too much from assessing the significance of the present examination in the case of essential contestability. For the general idea of essential contestability to be plausible, for it to “work”, only minimal assertion about the plausibility of holding a view at all, despite the assumption that there is no ultimately correct conception of it (the view) to be found, has to be established. The need to preserve the unity of one’s identity, which we may call our human condition, in social world requiring one to hold at least some views regarding different social phenomena, which is socially determined i.e. our social condition, provides the ample reasons for that (holding a view at all) according to the framework I have presented. This means that I have now rejected Gallie’s original intention of finding reasons for essential contestability (being about the nature of pervasive disputes involving ambiguous/vague/contestable socio-political concepts) which need not be explained neither in terms of psychological causes nor metaphysical afflictions. I unambiguously argue for the notion that it is better to explain the issue in terms of my choosing and, thus, needed. Therefore I claim that the theoretical framework, according to which the phenomenon of essential contestability should be assessed as socially determined, does not lack explanatory capacity in comparison to Gallie’s original theory.

¹⁵⁶ Cartesian reasoning has been the example preferred by me throughout the study. It serves its purpose also in this instance, especially since it rejects a wide margin of judgments (generally considered to be philosophical) as invalid, but this does not necessarily mean that there could not be other such traditions, perhaps failing the translation in ways yet unimaginable. In fact, one could even argue for the view that the very thing making one tradition distinct from another is the perceived inability to translate concerns of one tradition to another completely and comprehensively, albeit that claim cannot be examined. Nonetheless, it serves as a critical reminder that, if we assume there to be several distinct traditions, we very well might expect there to be problems of translation involved. In many instances, in which we perceive an inability to translate the concerns from the language of one tradition to that of another, the relation between the traditions is *asymmetrical* (recall “concerns of Cicero and concerns of the present time” discussed in section 3.4). I would venture a guess that there would be only a very limited number of cases in which the relation between the partially incommensurable traditions is “even” and the most central claims are mutually unintelligible to approximately same degree.

4. A RECKONING WITH ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPTS

In this last chapter, I will summarize the key arguments established in the course of the study. At first, I will approach Gallie's original theory with three simple questions: what is contested, why is it contested, and how is it contested? After that, in section 4.1, I move on to discuss the central points of the thesis of essential contestability preferred by me. Section 4.2 is reserved for the evaluation of success regarding the specific tasks I set for myself in the Introduction. In that concluding section, I will also briefly review the rather extensive list of outstanding questions for further study.

The most difficult question to answer, and the one I have been concentrating mostly on during the treatise, is "what exactly is Gallie talking about when he speaks of 'essentially contested concepts'?" After going through all seven basic conditions set by him, it was still unclear to what exactly was he referring to¹⁵⁷. With the help of Barry Clarke in section 2.7, in which I evaluated the criticism against Gallie's supposedly relativistic underpinnings, I was able to narrow the choice to two basic alternatives: 1) either the phenomenon of essential contestability is seen from the perspective of linguistic autonomy rendering the concepts themselves to be the source of contestability, or 2) the concepts are contested, in fact, as a by-product of some socially determined process which can be characterized as essential contestability. Although Gallie is asserting that the concepts involved in the pervasive social disputes can be identified from other concepts (confusedly) used by including two additional conditions that clearly refer to the social contexts of use, original exemplar and progressive competition¹⁵⁸, his insistence to characterize the issue focusing on the attributes of concepts posits him quite firmly to accept the first alternative mentioned.

After briefly answering "the question of what" can we now proceed to the question of why some group of concepts generates such endless disputes that warrants the use of 'essential' regarding those concepts? To begin with, there must be some property or characteristic found in a concept causing it to be 'essentially contested/contestable'¹⁵⁹? Two possible candidates for this role, norm-dependency and open texture, were introduced

¹⁵⁷ The summary of the seven conditions is already made in section 2.9.

¹⁵⁸ In principle, the condition (VI), original exemplar, could be interpreted as implying conceptual essentialism but that interpretation should be outright rejected for various reasons including those mentioned already in the Introduction.

¹⁵⁹ Gallie's original phrasing was of course 'contested' but 'contestable' is also included in this instance as it would be the proper terminological use (see sections 2.4 and 2.7).

in section 2.7 (while the criticism by John Gray was discussed) and found lacking. That of course does not automatically mean that no such property of a concept is to be found at all, only that during the examination of the basic conditions for essentially contested concepts and in the course of focusing more precisely to two of the most probable ones of those given by Gallie I was not able to find any. I take it as a plausible reason to look for that elusive property elsewhere.

The last question is not insignificant despite the problematics of the first two; actually I argue that it is the most relevant one when looking for other substantive options to ground a thesis of essential contestability upon. The answer to the question of how these concepts are actually contested Gallie gives us three related conditions: (V) reciprocal recognition, (VI) original exemplar, and (VII) progressive competition. With the condition of the reciprocal recognition Gallie is assuming that the participants can, indeed they even should, have these contests meaningfully even if they mutually acknowledge the fact that their “own use of it is contested by those of other parties” (Gallie 1956a: 172). Not everything is radically contestable in these conflicts since “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” (ibid.). First of all, we might be persuaded to view this condition as an affirmation by the participants that there indeed is some attribute of a concept to be found that causes it to be contested by others (norm-dependency or open texture, for example). The additional clause concerning the different criteria (of appraisive nature) of application seems to pinpoint the source of dispute to be the norm-dependency, not open texture. This is open to interpretation, however, as it is quite possible that Gallie is referring to the notion instead that to even contest a certain use of concept, one has to share something besides that which is contested. Another possible interpretation would be to assert minimally that the disputants need to be aware that their uses of this kind of concepts are contested as an empirical matter, as a fact. That would not, though, contribute to the “essential part” of contestation at the level of concepts in any significant way.

All in all, it seems that the condition of reciprocal recognition concerns certain social aspects of the contestation as it refers to the nature of stance they take to actual dispute. Same seems to be true regarding the conditions of original exemplar and progressive competition, the latter being a rather clear cut case referring to social activity

that can hardly be a formal condition of a concept¹⁶⁰. The status of original exemplar, on the other hand, is murky as ever if indeed the source for contestability lies in the nature of concepts alone. First of all, if the essentially contested concepts are distinguished from other confused concepts in part by their link to the original exemplar, why the original exemplar itself is not essentially contested but can serve this distinguishing function? If the original exemplar is not essentially contested in the same way that the concepts to which it serves as exemplary are, how can a concept of different status help to distinguish the usage of essentially contested concepts from other concepts not relevant in this picture? If the original exemplar refers to some socially determined conception that guides the uses of concepts it would seem that the resources for identifying essentially contested concepts as such are separate from the actual properties of those concepts? With a stress of imagination we can conceive that some group of concepts have a condition (in a strict sense) of referring to some other concepts but should we then talk about socio-political vocabulary as a whole, not about singular concepts¹⁶¹? The notion according to which a concept can hold a special status in relation to some other concept *as a condition of that concept* is far from clear. This is especially so since it would make more sense to treat that kind of exemplar in relation to a debate in question—therefore bringing actual participants (including their relations to each other and to the topic disputed) to the fore—rather than treat the theoretical status of the exemplar as a (somewhat) necessary condition for distinguishing the concept in question from confused concepts¹⁶².

¹⁶⁰ We can simply ask the following question: in what exact sense can we conceive the development solely at the level of concepts while assuming that there is still at least one attribute that makes the concept in question ‘essentially contestable’? On the other hand, if the progressive competition refers to empirical improvements concerning the conceptions held by people in some social setting, how can this help us to distinguish a property causing the concept to be essentially contestable without that property being actually socially determined? The theoretical framework having the capacity to provide answers to these questions must, at least, be far more rigorous and clear than the one Gallie is offering.

¹⁶¹ This sort of interpretation is not uncommon (eg. Ball 1998: 80; cf. Grafstein 1988: 19) though the actual reasons for preferring it vary considerably. I will discuss the relevancy of the approach that sees the matter of essential contestability as an attempt to characterize the political dimension and/or vocabulary of/in social arena elsewhere (Pennanen 2012). There are some problems associated with the notion of how one can examine *whole* vocabularies. In the case of political vocabulary, for instance, the contestability encountered is typically seen as a result of peculiar self-reflexivity of political language, the conclusion which takes into account the non-trivial fact that certain degree of contestability is caused by our linguistic resources.

¹⁶² The theoretical and terminological choices made by Gallie complicate the matter unnecessary, in my opinion. In this instance, for example, one has to include some kind of mitigating prefix (in this case, “somewhat”) in front of a term like ‘necessary’ which should be rather unconditional, if anything. The reason for this is Gallie’s assertion that not all conditions are fulfilled in “real world” cases in a similar way they are fulfilled in his artificial example. Another unwanted complication is the usage of the term ‘confused concept’ since to remain faithful to Gallie’s terminology one should replace it instead with “confused uses of concepts in a debate”. However, Gallie does not make a clear distinction between ‘identification of a concept’ and ‘identification of a use of a concept’ which makes it harder to describe his position with due diligence and respect for his original framing of the matter.

Thus, even when interpreted from a definitive standpoint, asserting that Gallie is indeed focused on the essential contestability of concepts from the perspective similar to that of linguistic autonomy, there is an explicit theoretical residual pointing way to the explanation of the issue as socially determined to be found in his theory that confuses the issue of tracking the underlying reasons for the intractable feel of the debates involving certain socio-political concepts. My argument in the course of the present study has been that we are better off when we change the theoretical focus from concepts to normative frameworks and forms of life. That means favoring the residual part of Gallie's theory in the expense of much of what he has stated about the essentially contested concepts. That does not mean that Gallie's project was an utter failure, on the contrary, it is indeed in the nature of many significant philosophical projects that they draw criticism like honey draws flies. Usually that is because there is some central insight evident in them but the theoretical articulation of it is lacking in some respect. To conclude, one could say that Gallie had the right idea or phenomenon in mind but he failed to articulate it at the right level (ie. social determination instead of linguistic autonomy, forms of life instead of concepts)¹⁶³.

4.1 Essential contestability as socially determined process

For a thesis of essential contestability to be a plausible account able to explain the underlying reasons for the phenomenon of there being numerous pervasive and seemingly intractable disputes about certain social issues it needs to reject the notion that these disputes are solely caused by the nature of concepts used. It should be emphasized, however, that a proponent of such a thesis need not to commit oneself to a view that there are no disputes whose origin is conceptually related; various sorts of verbal disputes and conflicts due to ambiguous usage of a concept still abound. One of Gallie's shortcomings was to define the scope of his theory of essentially contested concepts in such an obscure manner that it was too easy to interpret it to encompass practically all socio-political concepts in use due to the unclear status of the conditions supposed to do the job of

¹⁶³ Naturally, I have mentioned many other omissions (e.g. the need for the notion of superiority) in the course of the study but these considerations presented are the most central for my argument. Even if it pains me to leave things unsaid, this is a matter in which one cannot hope to cover all bases, so to speak. For example, I see the issue of translation to arrive to a scene after it has been already settled that one should not discuss the issue of essential contestability at the level of linguistic autonomy solely. This is a choice that simplifies the matter to some extent as the question of indeterminacy of translation could be taken into account while discussing concepts, not forms of life, as the source of contestability.

distinguishing that special group of concepts. In the end, his error is quite plain to see: too much effort was made to answer the problem of the possibility of confusion without giving enough attention to the question of what is actually at stake in these debates (prone to confusions). After it was decided that people in these debates contest a certain concept disputing preferred applications of others of the same concept, the focus on the “special” characteristics of the concept veiled two at least equally important factors concerning the issue: an actual debate including its nature (as distinguished from the nature of the concept in question) and “that elusive something” the concepts referred to. In a sense, Gallie’s thesis already contains the insight I personally see in the idea of essential contestability; if only had he replaced ‘the original exemplar’ with ‘the form of life’ thought exemplary by the some disputants while rejected by others on the grounds that some other form of life should serve as exemplar¹⁶⁴, the assumption after which other conditions would find their respective place in the overall account somewhat easily—although it remains debatable whether one is better off when framing the matter in form of conditions at all.

How should we view the matter of essential contestability, then, and should we even talk about the “essentiality” of it? In chapter 3 I have framed the outlines of an alternative we should give a closer attention. The central notion is that the phenomenon of essential contestability should be viewed as emerging out of attempts to frame and reframe the boundaries of respective forms of life of those involved in disputes in which those boundaries are questioned. My general conviction is that one cannot, and should not, avoid the talk about forms of life. When we are dealing with the normativity and differences of opinion regarding how our common political and social life should be organized, the way to go is not to evade the problems associated by framing the matter in terms that are easier to order into a theoretical framework because it is exactly the intractability of the issue we are interested in. I assume I belong to the minority here but each and every head butt to a wall is significant in its own right as one becomes convinced that there indeed is a wall.

¹⁶⁴ It can be argued that those that picked the issue up from where Gallie left it, most notably John Rawls with his distinction between concept/conception, did not commit the same mistake. Nonetheless as it turned out, Rawls retained the idea that the situation should not be characterized in metaphysical terms which is clearly shown by his work after *Theory of Justice* culminating in “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical” (1985) and *Political Liberalism* (1993). What was now sought was a reasonable disagreement while facing ‘fact of pluralism’ but mitigated by the liberal principles. Instead of concentrating on the nature of concepts, he focused on the dispute, and rightly so. The trick, of course, was to take the pluralism for granted—thus evading philosophical claims “I should like to avoid, for example, claims to universal truth, or claims about the essential nature and identity of persons” (Rawls 1985: 223)—and find the exemplary form of life in ‘public reason’ thus making his overall account suspect.

Speaking of head butts, it is not enough to make a blanket statement that we should be concerned with forms of life rather than with concepts. I also argue for the view point that we should give closer attention to the socio-phenomenological experience of actual individuals in conflicts involving the setting of the boundaries of the respective forms of life. That necessarily means that one has to give at least somewhat cohere, and as plausible as possible, description of how people actually form and sustain their identities, and how this affects the conceptions (and their rationality thereof) formed through one's particular normative frameworks. In sections 3.1–3.3 I have offered a conception of the relation between these elementary concepts concluding, in the end, that, even though one could not compare the superiority of respective conceptions from a third person perspective, the matter is not as problematic when viewed from a first person perspective. According to the conception of transitional rationality the conversion is regarded as a self-justifying and -correcting move in the course of which the new conception is considered as a practical gain in increased capacity. What actually is a practical gain in increased capacity to make sense of the social reality helping to find one's meaningful place in it is, of course, debatable. This is definitely one area where all social and humanistic sciences have something to offer. The fact that there are no easy and straightforward answers in a form of certain set of principles likely to be had regarding this important question, is no reason to dismiss the notion of essential contestability (as intimately tied to human condition) advocated in this study. It must be noted, however, that the fuzziness of my views concerning the role traditions play in the overall picture is a cause for concern... and for further study.

I also assert that the forms of life are at stake in some of the persistent socio-political disputes evidencing contestability to a degree that we are tempted to consider that contestability as essential. What motivates actual participants in those debates to keep the contestation on—despite the fact that it has proven to be tremendously hard to find convincing justifications for socio-political views based on different conception on how we should live our lives—is the very human aspiration to make sense of the world in a way that does not shatter the unity of one's personal identity. This is quite minimal assumption about the ontological nature of our identity and mode of being in the world, nonetheless, it is an ontological assumption and thus opposed to Gallie's stated intention to avoid explaining the issue with a reference to “metaphysical afflictions”. It is our affliction as human beings, however, our human condition.

Is this sort of conception, albeit a rudimentary one, characterizable as *essential* contestability? In attempting to evaluate the essentiality of the notion we should recall, yet again, the statement by Barry Clarke quoted in section 2.7. “If the contest is 'essential' then it is not the concept that is 'essentially contested' but what the concept represents; and this can only be maintained by claiming that some contests are structurally necessary” (Clarke 1979: 124). As I see the issue, we can indeed say that the contests arising out of need to ground one’s particular conceptions on forms of life are ‘essential’ if two arguments are established: 1) The characterization of the situation underlying the contests—specifically distinguished as those concerning the forms of life and their respective boundaries—is valid, and, 2) the situation characterized is such that contests necessarily come up as a result of it. I do believe that to be the case although I would be seriously amiss if I would not emphasize that there is no logically coercive reason to think so in sight; there is probably no way to demonstrate (in a strict sense) this to be so without resorting to some set of basic assumptions that can be thought otherwise; and that there can be other accounts describing the situation that do a far better job i.e. they are superior to the one whose seed is planted in this study.

4.2 Final conclusions and the outstanding questions

In the introduction I set out to find answers to three particular questions: 1) does the notion of essentially contested concepts by Gallie lead to an undesirable relativism; 2) can we even conceive a contestation with no end in sight as rational; and 3) is there a better way to characterize the elementary reasons for the phenomenon of essential contestability? First, I have concluded that Gallie’s theory can indeed lead to conceptual relativism although his position is more than difficult to grasp concisely. The inner tension between the focus on the nature of the concepts, on the one hand, and the aim to frame the social aspects of the issue, on the other hand, is considerable and arguably difficult to resolve satisfactorily. If anything, the situation is untenable from a theoretical stand point although I leave the evaluation of the degree of undesirability regarding conceptual relativism to the reader. Concerning the second question I will claim that, when seen from the perspective linking the disputes to forms of life, it is somewhat easy to see why people want to have these contests despite that there is at least some reason to believe that they are not going to be resolved any time soon. Thus, the actions of disputants and their conversions from one

view to another can be perceived as rational from the perspective of transitional rationality which makes the contests themselves reasonable (although not all conceptions held by the participants are necessarily “reasonable”¹⁶⁵). The third question is naturally the hardest for me to answer personally. Yet, I will tentatively claim that there is at least one way, namely the conception presented by me in chapter 3. However, it is only a preliminary account in which the complex matter of essential contestability is only cursorily examined.

There are quite a few open issues for further consideration. Even though I have tried to strongly argue for a view that one should not be overly focused on the nature of concepts, there are some conceptual issues that need to be taken into account. First of all, one must consider the possibility that it is actually the *incompleteness* of concepts that causes persistent disputes. Another matter of substantial import is the *fact/value separation* and the possibility/need to disentangle the two. The definitive answer to this dilemma has undoubtedly significant reverberations for any thesis of essential contestability. One important issue conspicuously absent in the present study is examination of the notion that these pervasive disputes are grounded on several types of *confusions*. It is also well within the realm of possibilities that our human capacity to solve our normative issues is *imperfect* to a degree for some or another reason that consensus is unattainable—although in that case the contests would still be essential, but for another reason. And yet another consideration worth looking into is issue of different *vocabularies* and their *self-reflexive* nature.

The second group of outstanding issues concerns the substantive understanding of the phenomenon of essential contestability. It can be argued, for example, that the issue of essential contestability should be understood in relation to the notion of original exemplar although in a sense of social determination; perhaps the phenomenon is not about forms of life but a matter of claiming to the *true successor* to some earlier belief/system of beliefs. For that and other reasons as well, more comprehensive examination of traditions is in order. Another perspective to the issue worth looking into is to picture the situation mostly in terms of *‘recognition’*. This would not mean that the outline of my conception presented in this study is necessarily false, but that there might be much better characterization of the

¹⁶⁵ From the account of the issue I have offered one cannot make a conjecture that all conceptions are equally valid. This is structured in the notion of transitional rationality in the form of viewing the deciding “criterion” to be a gain in practical capacity to make sense of the world. Although there is bound to be much controversy about what exactly is considered the gain in any given instance we can be safe to assume that not all changes of belief are gains.

same issue readily at hand. In this group I will also place the need to evaluate the *rhetorical aspects* of the phenomenon including *practical argumentation*.

The third set of outstanding issues relates mostly to the topics already discussed to some extent here. For instance, the thesis of essential contestability, as I have presented it, needs the conception of ‘identity’ for its support and it should be examined more comprehensively, what sort of identity we are actually talking about? As I currently see the matter, the thesis of essential contestability would be enriched by the *narrative conception of identity*. If the connection of narrativity to essential contestability can be established in an informative way, we can finally say something substantive about ‘meaning’... other than it is a curious term that seems to attract philosophers to study it. Another avenue already mentioned that must be given a serious attention is the *political aspect* of the matter. Can we plausibly distinguish some kind of political dimension that transforms the concepts used in the specific way? And speaking of transformations, what can we say about *conceptual change* in this respect, and how does it affect the characterization of essential contestability? That, if anything, is an elusive issue. With it come the considerations related to *synchrony/diachrony* and *historical understanding*¹⁶⁶.

What about my general purpose, stated in the Introduction, of finding out “what essential contestability as a supposedly inescapable phenomenon tells us about the relation between man and the world?” Unsurprisingly, the results in that regard are inconclusive. I have argued for a point of view that sees the phenomenon as a sign of a contestation that goes on much deeper at a personal level but perhaps also between different traditions of thought as well. Essential contestability in itself does not tell us anything, it is the theoretical perspective attempting to track the intractability and pervasiveness of socio-political disputes characterized by, and evidencing, essential contestability that offers us certain answers with which come even more questions. Nonetheless, I am convinced that what has been described by W.B. Gallie, me and most of the commentators taking a stance concerning the issue as “essential contestability” is not just a matter of surface disagreement that must be cleared from the way before the real work can start. There are lots of issues and concerns, indeed, through which one must thread one's way by placing them in proper relations with each other but the real and substantial question one is interested in is all the time at hand. In a sense, an answer to that question must be given

¹⁶⁶ It must be noted that W.B. Gallie himself discusses narrativity and historical understanding in *Philosophy and Historical Understanding* (1964). I actually think that his remarks about historical understanding are more relevant to the notion of essential contestability I am advocating than to his own. His considerations will be discussed in further works.

right from the start so that one does not lose oneself in the tangle of interweaved concerns. Exactly that first step has been taken in the present treatise by contending that various forms of life and the integrity of identities are at stake in these contests and/or disputes. One should not fall victim to a much too common hubris; the true test of this particular theory is what insight, and of which kind, can be gathered on the basis of it in the future.

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