**How Can We Get Real About Politics? The Realistic Imagination in Social Inquiry**

John G. Gunnell

Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing.

 Ludwig Wittgenstein

 Ceci n’pas une pipe.

 Rene Magritte

Right now it's only a *notion*, but I think I can get the money to make it into

 a *concept*, and later turn it into an *idea*.

 Woody Allen

**Abstract**

Michael Freeden’s *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* is a significant challenge to some of the dominant literature of contemporary political theory, including what often passes as both “ideal” and “real” approaches. It is important to locate his argument within this literature, but it is also necessary to recognize the extent to which that literature continues to reflect an epistemic as well as normative dimension of idealism. Three issues that are central to Freeden’s approach to the study of political thinking are: the relationship between language and thought, the concept of a concept, and his account of “the political.” A detailed examination of these issues suggests that his treatment may not be free of the legacy of epistemic idealism but that the difficulties can be addressed without impinging either on the basic purpose and intention of the project or on its entailed research agenda.

**Introduction**

My immediate purpose is to defend what I take to be the basic spirit of realism that is represented in Michael Freeden’s recent book on *The Political Theory of Political Thinking*: *The Anatomy of a Practice* (2013)[[1]](#endnote-1), that is, to study actual instances of the thinking that occur in political practices. Freeden views this, quite correctly I believe, as an alternative, or at least an addition, to studying the history of classic canon of political thought, engaging in analytical and prescriptive claims about justice, and the like. I will focus on three issues that are central to his argument: the relationship between language and thought; the nature of concepts; and the circumscription of “the political.” My primary concern is to think through and articulate my own position on these issues, but I will do so in part by querying certain aspects of Freeden’s account of these matters. Freeden stresses that much of what is advanced as realism has not cast off the normative idealism that characterizes so much of political theory, but I suggest that the residue of epistemic idealism continues to inform much of political theory, whether or not it presents itself as realist. It is useful, however, to situate, briefly, Freeden’s work among the burgeoning claims to realism in political inquiry (for fuller discussions of realism, see Gunnell 1995; 1998, ch. 3; 2011, ch. 3).

**In Search of Realism**

In the history of political science, “realism” has been a consistent rallying cry from at least the beginning of twentieth century, but, despite family resemblances, the word has signified some quite different agendas. Although the call to realism was in part a reaction, at the end of the nineteenth century, to both the epistemology and prescriptive character of European idealism, it was also informed by a critical, normative, and practical purpose that reflected the endemic concern among political scientists not simply to understand politics but, as recently vocalized, to “make political science matter” (e.g., Schram and Caterino 2006). Behavioralism in the United States, during the mid-twentieth century, was yet another demand for realism in the study of politics, and even though it often defined itself as a response to the resurgence of normative theorizing, it also embedded a vision of democracy and carried distinct evaluative and prescriptive implications (Gunnell 2004; 2013).

Contemporary realist political theory has often been influenced by various strands of philosophical realism. For some students of international relations, realism still means approaching the study of politics in terms of issues of power and self-interest, but even this approach had a distinct critical and normative background and direction. Others in that same subfield, however, following a more general trend in political theory, have adopted, as a meta-theory to guide and ground the conduct of inquiry, a form of realism based in part on the philosophy of scientific realism. These formulations consist of a mélange of arguments extrapolated from various elements of realism in the philosophy of science and from the critical scientific realism of individuals such as Roy Bhaskar. This brand of realism is also often driven by critical and normative agendas, but it claims to be realist in the sense of seeking theoretically grounded causal explanations that posit a transcendental metaphysical image of reality, which renders it not so far removed from the idealism that it seeks to counter. Often closely associated with this approach is some version of neo-Marxist structural realism of the kind advanced by Emile Durkheim and resurrected by variety of later social theorists such as Steven Lukes (1974).

Some theorists have adopted the term “realism” as a critical response to what they consider the growing dominance of what they refer to as “ideal theory” in analytical political theory and in the work of various individuals such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Jürgen Habermas. These critics pursue what some label “non-ideal theory,” but, like the term “ideal theory,” this is more a category than a specific position. It involves what is claimed to be a turn away from abstract utopian images of politics and rational deliberation that are disjoined from the practices of “real” politics. According to Bernard Williams (1986; 2005), ideal theory puts moral and ethical issues first and fails to recognize the autonomy of politics and the existence of what might be called a political morality and its distinctive features and concerns such as power, political order, and the problem of legitimacy. Mark Philp (2010; 2012) and Raymond Geuss (2008), among others, recommend a return to what they consider the realistic focus of thinkers such as Machiavelli and Max Weber, with an emphasis on institutions, leadership, and a recognition that politics is constrained by necessities created by political circumstances and the need to deal with worse-case scenarios. Principles, it is argued, are more the outcome than the initiation of discussion, and to the extent that principles and standards do matter, they are indigenous to politics. Others such as Jeremy Waldron (1989) emphasize the degree to which disagreement and conflict rather than consensus are at the heart of law and political life and cannot be reduced to legal formalities and rule-based reasoning.

A focus on conflict and plurality by some of those influenced by postmodernism has also been involved in once again raising politics to a somewhat metaphysical level (e.g., Connolly 2008; Honig and Stears 2011). Here “the political” is posited as distinct realm of plurality, difference, and agonism in which it is also necessary to take into account the emotional, passionate, and divisive dimension of human nature, rather than focus on rational deliberation and consensus, but this argument also valorizes a certain image of democracy. There has seldom been a claim to realism that did not carry its own ideological message, and in many instances, what is called “non-ideal theory” is often simply the normative “other” of ideal-theory and belongs to the same basic genre, which tends to occupy an ambiguous position between philosophy and politics. What both the neo-realists and their idealist brethren often fail to confront directly is the reality of their academic location outside political life. This not to say that work, such as either that of Rawls or his critics, lacks a dimension of political motivation or that their work does not at times find its way into the discourse of politics and law as well as the language of social science. But there is a fundamental qualitative difference between such literature and the rhetorical and political context of those, such as Machiavelli, who some contemporary academic theorists count as their classic forbears.

The recent embrace of the term “governance” in the study of politics has in many respects, like behavioralism and Progressive pluralism, been linked to the claim that the “real” business of politics is not, and in many instances should not be, conducted so much by formal institutions of government as by various elements of civil society. Like most claims to realism, it has a normative edge that suggests both that it is necessary to take a “bottom-up” approach to the theory and practice of democracy and that critically interpreting social phenomena is a form of political action (e.g., Bevir 2010; Bang and Sorensen 1999). A neo-realist sentiment was also reflected in the post-behavioral “new institutionalism” movement in political science with its renewed emphasis on history. This was to some extent a reaction to the growing dominance of rational choice analysis in political science, and, like the arguments of those who precipitated the anti-behavioral sentiments of the 1960s as well as those who propagated the perestroika rebellion of the early twentieth century, it claimed that the discipline had lost sight of the need to make social science matter politically and that it was necessary to re-engage politics and issues of public policy. And, finally, there is the recurring popularity of the type of naturalistic realism that once again represented in the increased emphasis on sociobiological and neuroscientific approaches to politics. (e.g., Hatemi and McDermott 2011). In any event, we might borrow what Hilary Putnam once said about philosophical realism, and suggest that although realism in the study of politics has “many faces,” it would be very difficult to specify a common denominator.

What is striking about much of what is referred to as realism is, however, not only the extent to which it is at least latently normatively idealistic but also epistemologically idealistic. And at this point, it may be helpful, at least as an aside, to address the relationship between idealism and the image of empiricism that is sometimes associated with claims to realism. Although idealism and realism are often contrasted, they are historically and philosophically linked. At the heart of the empiricist philosophical tradition has been what we might designate as an idealist epistemological implication. This is the assumption that knowledge and contact with reality, or the “world,” is based on some form of immediate experience grasped by the “mind,” whether it is of sense-data, the perception of physical objects, or the apprehension of abstract universals, which constitute the foundation of knowledge. It is easy to see how Lockean empiricism was transformed into idealism in the work of Bishop Berkeley and how the mind became the source and measure of all things. V.I. Lenin’s analysis of positivist “empirio-criticism” (1908) recognized the latter’s idealist roots even though positivism had presented itself as a challenge to idealist metaphysics. And, in turn, despite the extent to which Marxism involved a critique of German idealism and claimed that ideology was the product of material conditions, it nevertheless maintained that ideas are the immediate explanation of human action and historical change. Another aspect of the similarity between empiricism and idealism is what the philosopher Donald Davidson referred to as scheme/content duality, which he claimed, in addition to the two “dogmas” W.V.O Quine had ascribed to empiricism, was a “third dogma.” In the case of empiricism, this was a view of theories as instrumental mental constructs for organizing and generalizing about given facts, while in the case of idealism, the empirical world was framed by internal categories of the mind. The third dogma has important implications for what to avoid in studying of social.

A variegated idealist heritage still pervades political theory as well as what is considered to be empirical political inquiry. When we reflect on the recent upsurge in claims about the need to pursue realist political analysis and on the diversity among what social scientists and social theorists mean when they advocate realism, we might conclude, as Wittgenstein did with respect to philosophy, that “not empiricism and yet realism” is also the hardest thing in the study of politics -- and ask how we can be realists without succumbing to the pervasive residue of idealism. My concern here, however, is not to explore and critically assess the perspectives that have been advanced in the literature as realism but rather to provide as a context for specifying the nature of Freeden’s account of what would constitute a realistic study of politics.

**In Search of Political Thinking**

Much of Freeden’s earlier work was devoted to an examination of political ideologies and to developing a method for studying them. He has now moved on to advocating and propagating a broader account of what he argues is distinctively “political thinking” and of what would constitute a second-order interpretive approach to the study of actual political thought. His emphasis on the interpretation of the “thought practices” that comprise political life is not only a significant departure from the standard genres of political theory but an important step in reconciling some of the tensions between the characteristic literature in the subfield of political theory and the empirical studies of politics that dominate mainstream political science. Although his work is in part a reaction against “ideal theory,” he views much of what is now sometimes labeled “non-ideal” theory as still more a normative than an interpretive endeavor.

According to Freeden, what moves political speech and action is ideology, ideas, and, in general, what he refers to as “thinking” and “thought-practices.” These, he claims, both parallel and intersect language and political behavior. He especially emphasizes the manner in which concepts, as elements of thought, are both the “building blocks” of political language and the center of the constant search in politics for “finality” and “decontestation.” This search, he argues, is in part the consequence of endemic linguistic limits on constraining meaning, but more specifically a response to the “essential contestability” of concepts. He stresses, however, that the while the attempt to control meaning is a “semantic necessity,” it is also a “chimera.” Neither language nor politics can overcome the inevitable “surplus of meaning.” Freeden argues that although politics and the “conceptual morphologies” that constitute ideologies are, for various reasons, prone to contention, language as a whole is the site of a “permanent struggle” for meaning, which is in important ways determinative for political life. He argues that in addition to focusing on conscious political thinking, we must pay attention to the sub-conscious and non-discursive factors such as affect and emotion which infuse in politics. And, finally, he engages the problem of how, for interpretive purposes, to specify the meaning of “politics.” He seeks to reach the essence of what is political by moving inductively from particular historical instances of politics to a more general and inclusive and universally applicable concept of “the political”

**Thought and Language**

Although it is clear that Freeden’s project is a significant departure from most of what passes as both mainstream political analysis and political theory, it is less clear how much it deviates from the legacy of idealist epistemic assumptions. The dominant perspectives in social inquiry are still informed by a basic image that reaches back as far as Plato and Aristotle but is more directly apparent in the remnants of Cartesian and Lockean empiricism and its view of the relationship between thought, language, and human action. Language and social behavior are conceived as manifestations of ontologically, as well as circumstantially, prior mental states. It is difficult to determine exactly how Freeden conceives the kind of things that he refers to as political ideologies, political ideas, political thought and thinking, political beliefs, and so on, but reflections of the ideational and dualist picture might seem to persist in various aspects of his account both of politics and of what is involved in the interpretation of politics.

The languages of social science and social theory are inflected with an idiom that suggests that there is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, thought, and, on the other hand, speech and action. It is assumed, quite correctly, that people often do a bit of thinking and then speak or act accordingly, but this is not only taken as a model for understanding the general relationship between language and thought but is joined to the more general assumption that language, as such, is primarily a vehicle for expressing and conveying thoughts. It is assumed that by deciphering and interpreting the meaning of a person’s speech and writing, other persons gain access to the person’s thoughts, which are then deposited in their own minds. Characteristics of language such as intentionality are taken as manifestations of some primitive intentionality located in a place called the “mind.” Most social scientists assume something like this mind-first attitude and manner of speaking. They cling to the autonomy and priority of thought and claim that political conduct can be explained by reference to mental states involving ideas, beliefs, preferences, values, and the like, which can be detected in behavioral and linguistic markers but which, at the same time, are externally precipitated by education and experience. Ideology has typically been construed as configurations of ideas that are a product of social and physical contexts but that, once lodged in the mind, drive, and become visible in, speech and action. The basic image of ideology has not really changed much since the French ideologues invented the word and based it on Locke’s account of human knowledge as consisting of mental representations that arise from encountering the external world and that are then expressed in language.

This mind-first epistemological stance is practically useful and characteristic of our commonsense image of behavior, but it is very difficult to specify a fundamental difference between thought and language, apart from some vague sense of a distinction between “inner” and “outer” or what is unobservable and observable. There is no question that there is a logical or categorical distinction, but this is assumed to represent a more robust sense of dualism. Probably most people embrace an intuition that is not really dissimilar from the manner in which many mathematicians would be likely to claim that numerals are representations of numbers but might not able to explain exactly what the difference is between numerals and the Platonic objects of thought that numerals putatively represent. What might seem to be a similar commonsense intuition about the autonomy of thought has been articulated in a variety of, and in some respects quite diverse, elements of influential contemporary philosophical positions including: John Searle’s argument that the intentionality of language is a secondary manifestation of the “original” intentionality of the human mind; Noam Chomsky’s theory that humans are endowed with a kind of mental super-grammar that underlies, and allows them to learn, a natural language; and Jerry Fodor’s and Steven Pinker’s claim that there is a language of thought or “mentalese” whose content consists of representations in the mind that are expressed in our natural languages. At least since the middle of the twentieth century, however, a significant challenge to this position, which does not revert to some form of behaviorism or materialist reductionism, has been manifest in the work of Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, Wilfrid Sellars, Davidson, the recent arguments of Hilary Putnam, and others, who argue that the content of human thinking is basically linguistic and that only creatures that possess language can truly be said to think in the manner that we associate with human thought.[[2]](#footnote-1)

There is, indeed, a tight connection between thought and language /action, in the sense that we assume that we can understand what people do as a manifestation of what, for example, they believe, intend, desire, and so on. If, however, we take something such as a belief to be a cause of what is said and done, it can be misleading. It might seem to imply that there is some fundamental way to disentangle the two, which goes beyond simply noting that there is a pragmatic distinction. We can, like Prometheus, engage in forethought, believe something without acting on the belief, and engage in the kind of activity represented by Rodin’s *Le Penseur*. But most of what we refer to as thinking is actually embedded in what Ryle referred to as “knowing how,” that is, in our actions, habits, and dispositions rather than in separate mental episodes. The greatest difficulty with the mind-first scenario, however, is the fact that our beliefs and our intentions are nowhere to be found apart from what we do or say. If all *Le Penseur* did was to assume the pose, we would never figure out what he was thinking about. The occasional despair that arises from pondering how we can penetrate the meaning that resides in the mind and decode speech and behavior, has been what has in part given rise to the post-modernist claim that, so to speak, interpretation goes all the way down and is what really fixes meaning. However, neither mind-reading nor interpretation is the answer to understanding meaning. Interpretation is not really mind-reading, and there is no mind-book to be read. An interpretation is simply another text, and for the most part people do not interpret each other but simply understand the other by virtue of the fact that there is a mutual sharing of linguistic conventions.

What was once philosophically referred to as thoughts are now what are often called “propositional attitudes,” which are modeled on language. This is not to say that thinking is always or necessarily numerically the same as speech, but it is to say that the content is equivalent. When we speak of political thought, and the history of political thought, we are really usually referring to texts and political practices, but theorists often try to explain these things by speculating about the “ideas” or “thoughts” behind them and what they *really* mean. *The actual disjunction, however, the gap that we tend to believe must be bridged, is not between thoughts and words but between different understandings and interpretations of the words.* There is not some mental reservoir whose contents an actor can survey and from which the ideas, which are supposedly expressed in language and that propel behavior, are occasionally released. For the most part, people do what they do as a matter of following the conventions that inform the practices in which they participate, that is, the thought is in the doing rather than a preparation for, or a cause of, the “doing,” and it is only because there is first a “doing” that one can have the thought of performing such a “doing.” People can certainly depart from those practices and norms or innovate, but not de novo in the sense of engaging in acts of thinking that are prior to the language available to them. When someone claims that they are searching for the right words to express their thoughts, it is only a metaphor for saying that they have not quite arrived at or decided what they want to say.

If we are looking for something such as a semi-causal relationship between ideas and the words and deeds that are construed as their product, it would be more accurate to conclude that something such as mental intentionality is a reflection of language and the practices in which one participates. Words such as “thinking,” “idea” and “belief” have uses in our language, but they are not the names of occult mental states and processes. There is, for example, no special act, experience, or location of believing or intending, neither the head nor the brain, and in talking about something such as “thought practices,” we are not talking about something that is non-linguistic. It is a matter of whether or not items in a person’s linguistic repertoire are overtly expressed.

The “metaphorology” that is stored up in the traditions of our everyday manner of speaking often leads to the assumption, which is also quite evident in the dominant literature of social science and political theory, that there is something like a special private language of thought that is expressed in our actions and in our natural languages. My point is not to purge political studies of expressions such as “political thinking” or to suggest there are no episodes or acts of thought that may precede behavior, but only that it is important not to take literally the similes that govern these expressions and lead people to assume, for example, that thoughts are non-linguistic entities that are expressed in language in a manner similar to that of translating from one natural language to another. Human thought is basically a function of our ability to do things with words, which includes our ability to refrain from doing these things overtly, just as when after leaning to calculate with pen and paper, we can do it without these devices or just as we can learn to read silently and even without moving our lips. All the things that we associate with thinking and mental terminology in general involve operating with signs, and it is only after learning a language and acquiring the techniques of performing in various practices that one can engage in most of what we associate with thinking. We create insoluble puzzles when we factor out speech, behavior, and thought as distinct elements and attempt to reach general conclusions about the relationship between them. They are best conceived as modes of the same basic stuff, which, in the end, are conventions.

If we are to approach political thinking as the study of thinking *in* politics, it is essential not to allow devolution back to the myth of mental as an autonomous generative domain that lies behind words and deeds. And although a word such as “emotion” can be, and often is, used naturalistically to refer to physiological and neurological events and processes, this is not an answer to the question of the meaning of “emotion” or to the question of what emotions really are and how they function in politics. There is as strong a case to be made in social science for treating emotion discursively as there is for treating thought discursively. I would suggest that when we talk about thinking *in* politics, as well as social scientific thinking *about* politics, we are basically talking about language and that recognition of this fact, and relinquishing the traditional conception of mind, is what it required to be a social scientific realist. This issue, however, is closely related to the problem of specifying the nature of concepts.

**The Concept of a Concept**

 Freeden places a great deal of emphasis on concepts, and he claims that they are at the core of political thinking. He not only focuses on how concepts, as both objects of thought, and expressions in language, are the source of political contention but on how there is something about the very nature of language as a whole that leads to indeterminacy and lack of finality in political life. It might seem, however, that it would be just as convincing to claim that it is not language as such that is the problem but instead that there is something about the character of specifically political practices that leads to the manner in which language is *used* in these practices, that is, ambiguously, rhetorically, strategically, deceptively, and so on. Rather than seeking to determine whether language or politics is the dependent variable, maybe the best way to put it is to say that politics draws upon the possibilities and limitations that are inherent in language. But exactly what is meant by the word “concept” remains a critical issue. There is no more ubiquitous word in the literature of philosophy, as well as in the vocabularies of social theory and social science, than “concept,” but there is also no word that is more amorphously, elliptically, and diversely employed. There seems to be general agreement among philosophers that concepts are constituents of meaningful normative (ruled-governed) content-laden entities such as propositions, but the semantic character and location of concepts and their relationship to words has seldom been systematically treated.

The word “concept” first appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, and, from the beginning, it has been prominently identified with mental phenomena. Locke did not actually use the word, but he spoke about the clear and distinctive perception of simple ideas, generated by experience of the external world, as an “appearance or conception in the mind,” which could then be mentally manipulated, made more complex, and expressed in language. There is a long philosophical history of arguments to the effect that concepts are mental phenomena, and standard dictionaries continue to define a concept as a “thought,” “something conceived in the mind,” or an “abstract or generic idea.” But what constitutes something such as a thought or an idea is even more difficult to specify than the meaning of “concept.” We do not have much trouble identifying what kind of things words are, because words are signs and elements of language that are used in various ways to say and do certain things. What creates puzzles is the issue of what words refer to, and it is difficult not to lapse into the assumption that they are mysterious thought-objects. What a concept is and what we mean when we talk about *having* a concept and *using* a concept remain elusive.

It may be instructive that the word “concept” derives from the Latin noun “conceptus,” which meant, literally, the thing conceived, such as an embryo, and, as opposed to the German word *Begriff* and the typical English definition of “concept,” it implied less something ideational than a thing received or taken in, which also linked it to something understood. We can say, then, that before its idealization, “concept” basically referred to objects – but neither mental nor linguistic objects. I suggest that when we talk about concepts, we are really talking generically about things in the world, whatever their ontological status may be, whether the particular kind of thing is what we take to be observables (such as physical objects), conventional objects (e.g., human norms), theoretically posited entities (e.g., dark matter), fictional, imaginary, or virtual things and creatures, and so on. In thinking about the nature of concepts, we should discard Platonic realism in favor of a more nominalistic approach. When, for example, we are talking about the concept of *red*, we are really talking about a thing, which is either a token or a paradigm of red. Or when automobile makers talk about a “concept- car,” they are simply talking about an experimental car or a design that is not yet in production.

Concepts are neither some kind of indefinable mental entities nor an aura that surrounds words. They are neither expressions of ideas or representations in the mind nor linguistic reflections of the world. We usually use words to denote concepts, but words are not the same as concepts. When we talk about something such as, for example, a “scientific concept,” we do not mean simply scientific words, even though the connection between words and concepts is important. We are typically talking about or making a claim about a thing that exists and about the manner of its behavior and relationship to other things. More than one word can refer to the same concept or thing (e.g., Venus and the morning/evening star), and the same word can be used to refer to different concepts (e.g., the difference between Aristotle’s and Newton’s use of “motion”). Part of the confusion about words and concepts derives from the fact that in language, and especially in the case of literate societies and highly structured practices, there typically are, what we may call, “concept-words” that discriminate and specify either things or classes of things and that are used for representing these things. But it is a mistake to confuse the means of representation with what is represented. This was not only a constant theme of Wittgenstein but also the point that Magritte was making when he said “this is not a pipe.” And it is a mistake to move from the existence of concept-words to the conclusion that concepts are elements of language. Not every thing can be represented by one word, and not all words gain meaning as names for things. Words have meaning because of the way that they are used, and one of many such uses is specifying things. Although we may be inclined to say that people possess and use concepts, these are matters of having the ability to discriminate and describe a particular thing or class of things, and often it is a matter of knowing how to use a concept-word correctly or intelligibly.

There are many uses in our language for words such as “thought,” “idea,” “notion,” “intention,” “concept,” and so on, but we make a mistake if we assume that this mentalistic vocabulary serves primarily to name things, that is, if we assume that they are necessarily concept-words and if we begin to ask questions about their nature and where they are located. Social scientists and social theorists often find themselves all tangled up in their discussion of concepts and the use of words such as “power,” “authority,” and “justice.” Much of the confusion relates to a failure to distinguish between words and concepts, which in turn leads to the assumption that a word such as “power” concept-word names a specific thing. Despite her sensitivity to linguistic issues, this problem was very apparent, for example, in Hanna Pitkin’s influential The Concept of Representation (1967).

Pitkin deployed a central organizing metaphor in her discussion:

We may think of the concept as a rather complicated, convoluted, three dimensional structure in the middle of a dark enclosure. Political theorists give us, as it were, flash-bulb photographs of the structure taken at different angles. But each proceeds to treat this partial view as the complete structure. It is no wonder, then, that various photographs do not coincide, that the theorists’ extrapolations from these pictures are in conflict. Yet there is something, there, in the middle of the dark, which all of them are photographing; and the different photographs together can be used to reconstruct it in complete detail. (10–11)

This reads very much like the old parable about the blind men attempting to define an elephant, but the parable only makes sense because a listener already knows that an elephant is the thing that the men are attempting to define from their particular but restricted tactile perspectives. In a later edition of the book (1971), she stated in a footnote that after reading Wittgenstein she had come to realize that the metaphor was in some respects “profoundly misleading about concepts and language” (255), but she did not specify why it was so misleading. It was misleading because, in Pitkin’s case, there was, so to speak, no elephant in the room. She first of all assumed that “representation” referred to a particular thing that could be described in various ways. She put considerable emphasis on the etymology of the word “representation,” but although this provided insight into how the word had been used in the past, there was no way to extract from the word itself some core meaning. Pitkin’s analysis was predicated on, or at least encouraged, the assumption that instances of the use of “representation” were manifestations of a reference to something more universal and fundamental, but there was no thing that was the bearer of various descriptions. Second, there is actually no such thing as “the” concept of representation. There is only the word “representation,” which is used to refer to a variety of things but also to a *class* of things. It would not be entirely outrageous to say that there are not any such things as concepts. “Concept” is a word used in talking either about things or about concept-words. People also often use the word without any clear sense of what they are talking about, but this does not necessarily mean that the use is meaningless or unintelligible. A reader would probably get the point of Woody Allen’s remark without asking what are “notions,” “concepts,” and “ideas.” If I said to someone “What’s the big idea!” I would probably be understood and not stopped and asked what an idea is.

One response to my claims might be to argue that there are many “conceptions” of representation and that what Pitkin was actually doing was comparing these and attempting to elicit an underlying commonality in which they were rooted. But this again would tend to assume that “representation” named a thing, and as I will later point out, speaking of conceptions of concepts tends to be misleading. There is no such thing as representation, but rather many things to which the word “representation” has been applied, and there are a variety of things that have what we may construe as family resemblances among them, which have been subsumed under the category of representation. In many instances, uses of “representation” may be incommensurable, as, for example, in the case of the descriptive, and sometimes prescriptive, difference between what is referred to as direct and virtual political representation. These are not contradictory, because they are specifications of different kinds of things that are not necessarily in conflict with one another, even though they may circumstantially come into conflict. And the same can be said about things that are categorized as representation. What Pitkin actually seemed to be exploring was the ways in which the word “representation” had been employed in talking about politics. The difficulties that attach to her treatment are, however, common, and they are manifest in the way in which political scientists and political theorists analyze what they refer to as concepts such as power, to which they have ascribed many “faces” (e.g., Lukes 1974). Power, we are told, is not simply two-faced but at least three-faced. Such a metaphor is problematic if taken literally, which it often is, on the assumption that “power” names a thing with many manifestations and that it is something on which one can have different perspectives.

While Pitkin assumed that the problem resided in the complex nature of the object under investigation, an equally common mistake has been to claim that the problem is somehow located in the very nature of concepts, or at least, a certain kind of concept, that is, that a concept such as representation is difficult to deal with because its meaning is in some way necessarily inconclusive or indeterminate. The classic statement of the view that there is something about the nature of certain concepts that makes them problematical was the essay by W. B. Gallie (1956) on “essentially contested concepts,” which has been a source of continued confusion about concepts among social and political scientists. What is actually problematical, however, is how certain words have been used and, consequently, how they may in turn lend themselves to various uses. Gallie claimed to be isolating certain concepts, such as democracy, which, he argued, have a number of distinctive intrinsic attributes (such as the character of being evaluative, internally complex, and capable of different descriptions), which together necessarily give rise to disputes about their genuine meaning when, in fact, the very nature of such concepts prevents any determination of a uncontested meaning. One central problem with Gallie’s argument was that he tended to use “term,” “word,” and “concept” interchangeably, but on the whole, he actually seemed to be talking about words and demonstrating that because certain words can, and have been, used in many ways, it is difficult to narrow the usage. Because words such as “democracy” can be, and characteristically are, used differently and assigned different meanings, he concluded that they are somehow essentially contested and inherently ambiguous.

For theorists interested in politics, Gallie’s argument was appealing. It seemed to provide insight into the basic nature of political discourse as well as discourse about politics and to support a variety of agendas in social inquiry, and particularly those that construed inquiry as an interpretive endeavor and that were wary of the attempts of social scientists to construct the kind of precise definitions that they believed defined the practice of natural science. Gallie’s formulation has explicitly found its way into many discussions of political and legal analysis (e.g., Freeden, 1998; 2013; Collier, Hildago, and Maciuceanu 2006; Waldron 2002; Mason 1990; Grafstein 1988; Koselleck 2002; Swanton 1985; Lakoff 1980; 1984; Lukes 1974; Connolly 1993 [1974]; Rawls 1971; Dworkin 1972). And the same kind of basic claim has been involved in many other arguments.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1973) argued that one of the basic differences between natural science and social science is the “open texture” of the concepts both employed and studied by social scientists, which entails an “essential incompleteness” and “essential contestability” that cannot be solved by operational definitions and other such strategies. It is actually very difficult to conjure up an image of an open-textured concept, or even of a concept-word. It is difficult to determine what MacIntyre was saying apart from noting the manner in a word can be used in different ways. Similarly, what many political theorists, such as William Connolly, took from Gallie was what they saw as an answer to what they believed was the inherently pluralistic character of politics as well as a response to the growing demand among political scientists to model inquiry on what they believed to be the methodology of natural science and the manner in which the hallmark of scientific rigor and objectivity was the precise definition of words. Many political theorists argued that social phenomena, and consequently the language of social inquiry, are inherently historically and contextually diverse and changing and thus not amenable to such objectification. However, the response to Gallie’s argument by individuals such as Giovanni Satori (1984) as well as Theodore Lowi and Mario Calise (2011), was to call for a yet greater reduction in terminological fluidity and debate; conduct an inventory of social scientific concepts; and settle on more precise meanings of words applied to concepts; sort out the elements of various concepts; and prescribe a variety of formal concepts for organizing empirical research. Waldron, on the other hand, has defended Gallie’s basic claim and argued that many uses of Gallie’s image of concepts in discussions of law have tended to neglect his more important and radical point about the inherent indeterminacy of certain concepts and mistakenly simply to equate that point with the fact that some concepts are often disputed and the words not well-defined.

George Lakoff’s work in cognitive linguistics has focused on how rhetoric, persuasion, and emotion function in political discourse, and he wished to explain essentially contested concepts in terms of experimental evidence that linked them to human physiology. He claimed that a “concept is instantiated in the synapses of the brain” and arises from an interaction between the mind and world. This claim is another contemporary version of Lockean psychology, and the recent popularity of neuroscience and its philosophical offshoots among social scientists simply indicates that the brain has become the last refuge of the mind. The general argument that the synapses of the brain underlie our capacity to use language, or in Lakoff’s words “no brain, no concepts,” is credible, but, absent the brain, we would be without many things. The notion that there are concepts *in* the synapses of the brain is to fall prey to the metaphor that our brain is really like a file cabinet in which we store our words, concepts, and memories. Lakoff did not actually make good on his claims about the connection between concepts and the brain, and he could not possibly do so experimentally. He instead, and more reasonably, attempted to explain how contestation arises from the manner in which people inevitably use various “frames” for cognitive mapping, which involves “clusters” of idealized conceptual “metaphors” peculiar to various cultural settings and from which spring a series of “radial categories.” He claimed that a contested concept such as democracy is such a radial category and that it is open to contention, because it may be over-simplified or in competition with other members of a cluster. This was little more than a fancy way of saying something that hardly anyone would disagree with.

There is simply no such thing as an *essentially* contested or indeterminate concept, and even if Gallie had actually been referring to words, he was also wrong in claiming that some words are essentially contested. George Orwell hypothetically demonstrated just how determinate words might be, and one might suggest that there has been evidence of this in various actual political regimes and that, in a more benign manner, it is manifest in highly regimented practices such as what Thomas Kuhn referred to as “normal science. The root of the problem that is attributed to concepts is still either, and sometimes both, a failure to distinguish between words and things or between different *kinds* of concept-words. When in some field of natural science there is what might be referred to as a contested concept, it may be a matter of making a taxonomic decision, but, as in the case of what Kuhn referred to as a scientific revolution, what is involved is often a dispute about to what thing a particular word should refer. For example, in the case of the revolution in geology in the mid-twentieth century, a central issue was the meaning of “continent.” Although, for nearly everyone, “continent” continued, in everyday speech, to refer to a category of geographical phenomena, the theoretical issue in geology was whether it referred to certain entities fixed on the earth’s crust or whether it referred to drifting tectonic plates. What happens in scientific revolutions is that there is change in what are conceived as the things populating the world, whether or not there is parallel change of words.

What are involved in most disputes about, for example, democracy is disagreement about to what kind of a state of affairs the word “democracy” should refer. Debates about democracy do not, for the most part, emanate from the nature of a word or a concept, even though there are instances in which a failure to distinguish between the uses of a word may give rise to controversy. People might argue about the appropriate use of a word such as, for example, in the case of a controversy about whether the American polity is a democracy or a republic. The parties to the controversy might not disagree about the nature of the United States government and consequently would be talking about the same thing. But they might, in another instance, agree about what constitutes a democracy and disagree about whether the United States is an instance. It would be reasonable to say that the use of certain words is characteristically contested, but this is often because, as in the case of “democracy,” a word has historically accrued a great deal of either approbation or disapprobation on which an argument may draw. It was well into the nineteenth century before Americans were happy referring to the United States as a democracy, but, ever since, they have been obsessed with sticking to a positive valence.

Closely related to the issue of whether there are essentially contested concepts are variations on what social scientists often speak about as the manner in which concepts can, or have the potential to, be “stretched” or “travel” (e.g., Satori 1970; Collier 1993; Goetz 2005; Radaelli 2000; Morgenbesser 2014). Although such a claim can make sense, the use of words such as “stretching,” “traveling,” and the like often tend to constitute misplaced, or at least confusing, metaphors. In these arguments, the subject of these attributions is usually not clear, even though in most instances it seems that it is actually the scope of words or classifications that are undergoing these transformations. The problem with such imagery is that it may lead to odd questions such as that of how far we can stretch a concept before it becomes another concept, when we might reasonably ask how far we can stretch the use of a word before we are talking about a different thing or class of things. We might argue, for example, that the concept of evolution in biology could be internally stretched and even travel to other fields without changing its basic identity, but social scientists are not typically talking about this kind of issue. Most of these discussions revolve around the issue of how social scientists can most effectively categorize various phenomena or how certain words, because of the ways in which they have been used in the past, tend to continue to lend themselves to a particular form of usage. The heritage of use attaching to some words may allow greater flexibility than others. There is nothing about a word itself that allows or encourages this kind of adaptation.

What might be construed as the underlying issue in an analysis such as that of Pitkin, as well as in arguments about essential contestability, conceptual stretching, and the like, has, as already noted, been what a number of theorists have claimed to be the difference between the core meaning of a *concept*, such as justice, law, power, etc. and derivative *conceptions* of these concepts (e.g., Rawls 1971; Dworkin 1972; Hart 1961; Lukes 1970). There is an important issue that surfaces in these claims, but it has not been adequately explicated. Rawls argued that, upon reflection and analysis, it is possible to discern a common content to the concept of justice, which he designated as fairness, but that there are contested specifications or conceptions of what constitutes fairness -- utilitarian, egalitarian, etc. Dworkin claimed that we can isolate a general concept of fairness but that there are different “conceptions” of what it entails. In the famous debate between H.L.A. Hart and Lon Fuller (1958) about the nature of law, there really was not much disagreement about either facts or values, in this case the nature of the Nazi regime and its acceptability, but rather whether its status as a legal-system depended on a moral attribute. While Fuller argued that it is impossible to separate fact and value and that if a system of rules and practices did not meet certain normative criteria, it could not be a valid legal system, Hart argued that the issue was whether a particular system of law was morally good or bad was quite different from its empirical identity as a legal system.

 A problem with a claim such as that of Dworkin is that “conception,” which the dictionary also refers to “something conceived in the mind,” is not easily distinguished from “concept.” Arguments such as those of Rawls and Dworkin, which employ words such as ‘justice” and “right” pivot on the existence of a particular class of concept-words. It is important once again to stress that some of the confusion about concepts emanates from the fact that there are different kinds of concept-words. And it is important not to use one kind as a paradigm for assessing another kind, such as in the case of positivist claims about values lacking meaning when meaning is conceived as correspondence with some object in the world. It would be possible to construct an extended taxonomy of concept-words, but I will focus on four kinds, which are particularly salient in social inquiry.

*Theoretical* concepts-words appear in science as well as in other relatively determinate linguistic communities and cultures that are bound together by assumptions and claims about what kinds of things exist and the manner of their behavior, that is, they are bound together by sharing ontologies. Benjamin Whorf has in later years been the subject of a great deal of criticism because of what was assumed to be his linguistic idealism, but what he was really claiming was not that the “world” is a reflection of language but that an ontology is embedded in our use of language. Theoretical claims represent *nothing*, because they provide the framework of what is represented. In natural science, theoretical concepts are usually, but not necessarily, designated by a particular word. Social scientific claims and assumptions about the nature of social reality also contain theoretical concepts, and theoretical concepts are also at the core of the self-understanding of social actors and their commonsense *Weltbild*. It is the theoretical disjunction between the practice of social science and the practices that constitute its object of inquiry that gives rise to many of the epistemological, methodological, and practical problems in the relationship between social science and its subject matter. This might be referred to as the two-language or two-theory problem or condition. This is what most fundamentally distinguishes social science from natural science. The claims of both natural science and social science are conventionally and linguistically expressed, but while natural science posits natural objects, social science posits conventional objects, and there is a fundamental theoretical difference between natural objects conceived by natural science and the conventional objects that are the subject matter of social inquiry. Consequently, there is a fundamental difference in how we study them.

While we typically speak of natural science as *representing* the world, it would more accurate to say that natural science, at the theoretical level, *presents* the world. After natural science, or some other authoritative first-order discourse provides an account of the world, it is not possible to check that account by comparing it with the world but only with some other comparable but incommensurable account either within science or another conceptual domain such as religion. While what Kuhn referred to as “normal science” can be said to represent and make claims about natural facts, theoretical or presentational claims informed the specification and identity of those facts. The theories of natural science are constitutive of what scientists mean by the “world,” and although we may say that empirical hypotheses are tested by comparing them with the facts, theoretical transformation is ultimately a matter of persuasion and conversion. Although social science is in one respect presentational in that it also involves theoretical assumptions and claims about the nature of social phenomena, its typical conduct is basically a representational enterprise. No matter how social phenomena are construed by social science, they have been theoretically and conceptually pre-constituted in the speech and behavior of social actors. The task of social inquiry is to understand and interpret that universe, that is, to *represent* it and *convey* it in the language of social inquiry. This involves the problem of how to represent social phenomena and the manner of their instantiation in various social practices. Consequently, the fundamental problem of social science, as Max Weber recognized, is to find an appropriate language of representation, a language of interpretation that can adequately account for and clarify the meaning of social facts but also avoid reification or confusing the vehicle of representation with what is represented. The latter may be the most significant problem in social inquiry.

*Categorical* concept-words are those that, on the basis of various criteria, either internal to a domain of discourse or externally generated by an interpreter of that domain, are used to discriminate and classify things that have often already been theoretically specified. Here we could include stipulative and functional definitions, ideal-types, retrospectively constituted traditions, certain models, and the like. With respect to natural science, for example, we might say that in physics, atoms and molecules, and the distinctions between them, represent theoretical kinds, while the classification of bees is basically categorical. In natural science, however, there are sometimes pointed disputes about the status of certain concepts. For example, in evolutionary biology, there is a significant and persistent controversy about the concept of species, as well family, that is, whether they refer to theoretical kinds within the context of evolutionary theory or whether they are taxonomic categories. Categorical concept-words may be found at all levels of discourse, but they are particularly prevalent and necessary in fields such as social science and history, which are confronted with the problem of representing, reconstructing, or interpreting historical particulars, which do not lend themselves to theoretical amalgamation. Projects such as that of Satori, which are often associated with much of behavioral social science, fail because of the variable and changing character of social phenomena, but despite the particularity of such phenomena, there is still a need for generalization. This kind of problem was what led to formulations such as Weber’s ideal-types and Wittgenstein’s emphasis on a philosophical method that involved the invention of fictitious “language-games” that would yield “perspicuous representations” and would reconcile the reality of particularity with the concern for generality. So in the case of social science, there is both the problem of understanding and interpreting the concepts that compose social phenomena and the problem of formulating and choosing between the concepts for accomplishing those tasks. And there are the constant problems of confusing the means of representation with what is represented and of using one mode of representation as a paradigm for assessing others, such as in the case of the rise of rational choice analysis.

Social science typically employs a number of *analytical* concepts-words. These are in many ways like categorical ones and, like the latter, easy to mistake for theoretical concepts. But they are more arbitrary than categories. They construct or carve out a domain that is composed, on the basis of some criteria, of various elements – much in the same manner that sets are constructed in formal logic. The elements of analytical construct are not the same as parts of a whole. Any object could in principle be part of a set. Modernity might be an example of this type of concept-word. David Easton, for example, claimed that what he meant by a political system was a matter of analytically factoring out particulars and constructing a whole that might have no empirical counterpart and not even a family resemblance. He argued that even “a duckbilled platypus and the ace of spades” could be construed as a system, if it were, in some manner, useful as a tool of analysis.

Social inquiry not only deals with values as social phenomena but often wishes to engage in evaluative and prescription claims about such phenomena, and this brings us to what I will refer to as *modal* concept-words. These are what Stephen Toulmin referred to as “modal signifiers.” They include good, beautiful, right, just, rational, probable, hard, high, loud, and so on. Unlike theoretical terms, they do not carry with them any necessary ontological commitments and are not confined to a particular practice or form of discourse. Although through usage they have acquired a certain invariant force or meaning, their criteria of application are relative to particular practices and language-games. It is not their basic meaning that is disputed but the criteria of their use. The presence of a modal term, such as “good,” in a sentence does not even necessarily indicate or dictate that the sentence is, for example, evaluative or prescriptive, but the residual force attaching to “good” is a consequence of its past use in such sentences. This resembles what someone such as Dworkin speaks of as the difference between concept and conception, but it is a mistake to claim that there is some core meaning inherent in a word such as justice. The meaning derives from past usage and not from anything about the word itself. Part of what might lead someone to assume that these are essentially contested or stretchable is that, like theoretical concept-words, they are often used in presentational claims about what is right, just, true, or beautiful, which, like theoretical claims, cannot be compared with the world because they are constitutive of the ethical, religious, and aesthetic world. What was wrong with the traditional attempt, characteristic of positivism, to distinguish between fact and value was the assumption that all of language could be subsumed under these two categories, but the underlying truth of this distinction was that what is right, good, and just belongs to the same universe of discourse as that which posits what is real. Finally, we come to what all this means for thinking about politics and about “politics,” that is, the thing and the word.

**The Concept of “The Political”**

Any study of politics must come to grips with specifying the units and boundaries of what we take to be political. There are all sorts of ways to do this, and maybe the greatest problem is not so much that of which way to choose but that of distinguishing between, and not confusing, these ways. But the important thing to remember is that the business of social science is to represent. It is a relational activity that involves two autonomous parties, and although one party might influence the other, it cannot ultimately be definitive of the other. The objects of natural science do not construct their own identity, but the identities of the objects of social science are not hostage to the theories about them.

During the twentieth century, political theorists, ranging from Carl Schmitt to Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin, tended to confer a quasi-ontological status on politics and to transform the adjective “political” into a noun-phrase, that is, a concept-word that named a thing that was in some way universal despite differences and transformations in its particular manifestations. For these individuals, “the political” was something transcendentally real that manifested itself historically from time to time but was always less than fully realized and in danger of being effaced, as Arendt so dramatically portrayed in the *Human Condition* (1958). This kind of argument was in part simply the consequence of reverence for the subject matter as well as a strategic attempt to establish the autonomy of political theory, but it was also in part precipitated by the persistent methodological problem of reconciling particularity and generality. To refer to “the political” has now become commonplace, but exactly what it means has become more ambiguous. Although Freeden rejects metaphysical claims about “*the* political,” he substitutes a categorical/ functional universality, which sometimes seems to take on overtones that echo earlier uses of the phrase. The question is whether something that looks like politics, acts like politics, and talks like politics is, unlike the case of the proverbial duck, really politics.

Definitions of politics are almost always unsatisfactory, because, first, the problem that they seek to solve is not really definitional, that is, the problem of getting to the reality of politics, which does not have an essence any more than any other conventional practice, and of generalizing about something particular and historical. Second, there are many types of definition – those based on a particular attribute, on how a word such as “politics” has been used, theoretical definitions, functional definitions, analytical definitions, operational definitions, stipulative definitions, and so on. The questions to be asked are for what purpose a definition is constructed and what criteria of sameness are being applied. “Politics,” in the first instance, refers to a historical, evolving, socially circumscribed, and dispersed particular form of practice, which arguably had a beginning and will possibly have an end as a conventionally discriminated element of social organization. Any other use of “politics,” although not illegitimate, is necessarily derivative. Politics does not have a theoretical nature, and there cannot, strictly speaking, be a theory of politics or a theoretical definition any more than there can be a theory of chess, but only a description of such a practice. There may, however, be a theoretical account of the kind of phenomena of which various social practices such as politics are instantiations.

Social science is not, however, simply a historical or idiographic endeavor. It seeks to generalize. In its search for generalization, often through the use of ideal-types or positing categorical similarities, there is a temptation to attribute a shadow of theoretical essentiality to politics. This often leads to the mistake of defining “politics” by singling out an attribute, such as the exercise of power, or set of attributes, which seems to transcend historical differences and transformations and represent something more universal. There is, however, the problem of confusing categorical and analytical universality with theoretical universality. Another strategy, often as a way of avoiding a single attribute definition, such as power, is to choose, as in the case of David Easton’s (1953) definition of politics as the “authoritative allocation of values,” a functional definition, which also allows generalization and the possibility of ascribing politics to a society or practice in which there is no such conventional and historical recognition of the existence of politics. The principal difficulty with such a strategy is not only the tendency to imply a transcendent universality but also the manner in which it diverts attention from the particularities that constitute the reality of politics in a specific time and place.Part of the problem with the word “politics” stems from the fact that it is both a concept *in* political discourse and behavior and a term for talking *about* political thought and behavior, and there is a problem of how to reconcile the two.

 Observations of politics can yield claims about family-resemblances among historical and cultural instances of political practice, but noting such similarities, does not achieve the goal that is being sought through these definitions, that is, the equivalent of some ur-phenomenon of which these putative instances of politics are manifestations. But political practices do not stand still for those who wish to define politics. The basic problem is, again, that politics, like science, religion, and other practices, is not a theoretical object. Although the term “politics” can be used metaphorically, analytically, categorically, or functionally to pick out a variety of attributes in various aspects of social life as a whole, the term in its primary meaning continues to refer to practices that have been historically and culturally defined and connected and distinguished by an internal self-understanding of its contents and qualitative features.

In the case of social science, the scheme/content distinction is not a mistaken philosophical dogma, but a condition of inquiry. There is no simple and general answer to the question of how to approach representing politics, and it is not a matter of inviting many perspectives in the hope that they will add up to a complete picture -- as if we were attempting to illuminate all the characteristics of some theoretical object such as an atom. The tendency to speak of something as “political” because it possesses an attribute that is often, or even always, associated with what we have typically observed as the practices of politics is not in any way necessarily incorrect, but it is important not to allow slippage between metaphorical or figurative use of “politics,” or a categorical concept of politics, and the use of “politics” to refer to a particular and concrete kind of practice. There are many well-known examples of conflating the particular and analytical uses of terms such as “politics,” even in the case of investigators who are committed to “thick descriptions” of social phenomena. There was, for example, the case of anthropologists who believed that magic was, literally, primitive science or political scientists who maintained that locating something such as relationships of power in a society was equivalent to identifying the existence, and an instance, of politics. And when anthropologists today study exotic cultures they are often necessarily forced to derive their mode of representation from icons indigenous to their own culture. There are the problems, then, both of reifying an abstract concept of politics or some other token of representation and of extrapolating from the particular to the generic. Both involve confusing the means of representation with what is being represented.

It is necessary to acknowledge, however, that, even apart from examples from the history of the classic canon of political theory, there are instances of a literal attribution of theoretical status to politics, which has also contributed to the transformation of the adjective “political” into the noun “the political” and which carries with it the implication that politics has an element of essentiality that transcends its conventional forms and transformations and that gives it the status of a theoretical natural kind concept. This is characteristic of various arguments in sociobiology as well as in more recent attempts to draw on the literature of cognitive neuroscience, but it is also evident in the transcendental claims of some aspects of contemporary political philosophy ranging from positions as diverse as neo-Marxism to that of theorists such as Leo Strauss. There are various complex philosophical and ideological motivations behind the emergence of essentialist notions of politics and claims about the ontology of “the political,” but they often involve simply a misbegotten application of an analytical concept, which itself is the extrapolation of a property typically attributed to a historically situated form of political life.

 I would suggest that there may be a problem with Freeden’s attempt to move from “micro-instances” of politics and political thinking to a “macro” designation of something that is “ubiquitous” and even manifest, as he claims, in “directing a choir.” The basic problem is that he is in part still grappling with the scheme/content dilemma. In the case of social phenomena, and dealing with the issue of how to generalize about conceptually pre-constituted particulars, the scheme is a mode of *representing* rather than of *defining* those particulars. Freeden’s approach seems to be a case of picking attributes from a family of conventionally self-identified practices and then noting that these same, or similar, general attributes are present in other practices and thus instances of something universal. This is not unlike suggesting that nationalism is actually an instance of religion, because of the attributes of faith and dedication that may be common to both. In fact, the term “religious” was first applied to what we now designate as religions, because they manifested what the word meant, such as dedication. One might speak of someone practicing a hobby such as fly-fishing as making a religion out of it. One of the problems with this kind of approach to finding generality in politics is that the very search for realism that prompts the generalization may be subverted by making everything look alike, that we fail to recognize fully the logical type-jump that is involved and begin to confuse the mode of representing politics with the realities of politics. This was the kind of problem that Max Weber was attempting to avoid by noting the need to not limit inquiry to one “ideal-type” and what Wittgenstein claimed was the need for a variety of “perspicuous representations,” that is, to adapt the means of representation to capturing and conveying the meaning of particular thing that is represented. It seems to me that what Freeden refers to as “the political” might be best viewed as an ideal-type and not a literal claim about the ubiquity of politics.

**Conclusion**

 I do not believe that my queries in any way challenge the basic character of Freeden’s argument about the study of political thinking and the uniqueness of its place among contemporary claims to realism. In fact, I suggest that dropping the phrase “the political” and treating politics as a distinct and historically autonomous practice; deploying his macro-image of politics as ideal typification; stressing the basic unity of language and thought; and relinquishing the argument that produced the image of the essential contestability of concepts, would all enhance the claim to realism and even more starkly distinguish his project from other genres of political theory and political science.

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 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. My arguments reflect this literature, but I am not cluttering the text with references to it. For more extended discussion see Gunnell 1998; 2011; 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)