

*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society at 21, Bedford Square, London,
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IX.—ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPTS.

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INTRODUCTORY.

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

What forms could the required elucidation take? The history of philosophy suggests three. A philosopher might in some way discover, and persuade others that he had discovered, a meaning of the hitherto contested concept to which all could henceforward agree. Alternatively, a philosopher might propose a meaning for the contested term to which, rather than continue in their previous disagreement, the disputants might decide henceforward to conform. Thirdly, he might claim to prove or explain the necessity (relative to certain explanatory conditions) of the contested character of the concept in question, as for instance Kant tried to do in his Antinomies. Recently, however, we have been taught that effective philosophical elucidations are likely to be of a much more complicated and elusive

character than any of the above, and there is to-day a widespread repudiation of the idea of philosophy as a kind of "engine" of thought, that can be laid on to eliminate conceptual confusions wherever they may arise. Now without wishing to advocate a return to any extreme form of this latter view, I hope to show, in the case of an important group of concepts, how acceptance of a single method of approach—of a single explanatory hypothesis calling for some fairly rigid schematisation—*can* give us enlightenment of a much needed kind.

The concepts which I propose to examine relate to a number of organized or semi-organized human activities: in academic terms they belong to aesthetics, to political philosophy, to the philosophy of history and the philosophy of religion. My main thought with regard to them is this. We find groups of people disagreeing about the proper use of the concepts, *e.g.*, of art, of democracy, of the Christian tradition. When we examine the different uses of these terms and the characteristic arguments in which they figure we soon see that **there is no one clearly definable general use of any of them which can be set up as the correct or standard use.** Different uses of the term "work of art" or "democracy" or "Christian doctrine" subserve different though of course not altogether unrelated functions for different schools or movements of artists and critics, for different political groups and parties, for different religious communities and sects. Now once this *variety* of functions is disclosed it might well be expected that the disputes in which the above mentioned concepts figure would at once come to an end. But in fact this does not happen. Each party continues to maintain that the special functions which the term "work of art" or "democracy" or "Christian doctrine" fulfils on *its* behalf or on *its* interpretation, is the correct or proper or primary, or the only important, function which the term in question can plainly be said to fulfil. Moreover, each party continues to defend its case with what it claims to be convincing arguments, evidence and other forms of justification.

When this kind of situation persists in practical life we are usually wise to regard it as a head-on conflict of interests or tastes or attitudes, which no amount of discussion can possibly dispel; we are consequently inclined to dismiss the so-called rational defences of the contesting parties as at best unconscious rationalizations and at worst sophistical special pleadings. On the other hand, when this kind of situation persists in philosophy (where some disputant continues to maintain against all comers that there is one and only one proper sense of the term "substance" or "self" or "idea") we are inclined to attribute it to some deep-seated and profoundly interesting intellectual tendency, whose presence is "metaphysical"—something to be exorcised with skill or observed with fascination according to our philosophical temperament. Now I have no wish to deny that endless disputes may be due to psychological causes on the one hand or to metaphysical afflictions on the other; but I want to show that there are apparently endless disputes for which neither of these explanations *need* be the correct one. Further, I shall try to show that 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. 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.

I shall first set out in some detail a highly artificial example of an essentially contested concept, with a view to showing how any proper use of this concept is in the nature of the case contestable, and will, as a rule, be actually contested by and in another use of it, which in the nature of the case is contestable, and will . . . and so on for an indefinite number of kinds of possible use: these mutually contesting, mutually contested uses of the concept, making up together its standard general use. Then I shall list, with a view to logical "placing" of this kind of concept, a

number of semi-formal conditions to which any concept of this kind must conform, and shall indicate the different relations of these conditions to any such concept, again making use of my artificial example. I shall then discuss some live examples which approximate closely to my artificial example, so that, despite their several peculiarities, I think I can reasonably be said to have explained or justified their use by comparing them with it. I shall next discuss what seem to me the most important implications of my new grouping of concepts for general philosophy, and shall conclude by trying to meet some objections that might naturally be raised against it.

THE ARTIFICIAL EXAMPLE.

We are all acquainted with the concept of "championship" or of "the champions" in various games and sports. Commonly a team is judged or agreed to be "the champions" at regular intervals, *e.g.*, annually, in virtue of certain features of its performance against other contesting teams. Then for a certain period, *e.g.*, a year, this team is by definition "the champions" even though, as months go by, it becomes probable or certain that they will not repeat their success. But now let us imagine a championship of the following kind. (I) In this championship each team specializes in a distinctive method, strategy and style of play of its own, to which all its members subscribe to the best of their ability. (II) "Championship" is not adjudged and awarded in terms of the highest number of markable successes, *e.g.*, "scores", but in virtue of level of style or calibre. (No doubt for this to be manifested a certain minimum number of successes is necessary.) More simply, to be adjudged "the champions" means to be judged "to have played the game best". (III) "Championship" is not a distinction gained and acknowledged at a fixed time and for a fixed period. Games proceed continuously, and whatever side is acknowledged champion to-day knows it may perfectly well be caught up or surpassed to-morrow.

(IV) Just as there is no “ marking ” or “ points ” system to decide who are the champions, so there are no official judges or strict rules of adjudication. Instead what happens is this. Each side has its own loyal kernel group of supporters, and in addition, at any given time, a number of “ floating ” supporters who are won over to support it because of the quality of its play—and, we might add, the loudness of its kernel supporters’ applause and the persuasiveness of their comments. Moreover, at any given time, *one* side will have the largest (and loudest) group of supporters who, we may say, will *effectively* hail it as “ the champions ”. But (V) the supporters of *every* contesting team regard and refer to their favoured team as “ the champions ” (perhaps allowing such qualifications as “ the *true* champions ”, “ the *destined* champions ”, “ *morally* the champions ” . . . and so on). To bring out the importance of this point, we may suppose that all groups of supporters would acknowledge that at a given moment one team T_1 are “ the effective champions ”. Yet the property of being acknowledged effective champions carries with it no universal recognition of outstanding excellence—in T_1 ’s style and calibre of play. On the contrary, the supporters of T_2 , T_3 , etc., continue to regard and to acclaim their favoured teams as “ the champions ” and continue with their efforts to convert others to their view, not through any vulgar wish to be the majority party, but because *they believe their favoured team is playing the game best.* There is, therefore, continuous competition between the contestant teams, not only for acknowledgement as champions, but for acceptance of (what each side and its supporters take to be) the proper criteria of championship.

THE CONDITIONS OF ESSENTIAL CONTESTEDNESS.

In order to count as essentially contested, in the sense just illustrated, a concept must possess the four following characteristics:—(I) *it must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement.* (II) This achievement must be of an internally complex

character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole. (III) Any explanation of its worth must therefore include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features; yet prior to experimentation there is nothing absurd or contradictory in any one of a number of possible rival descriptions of its total worth, one such description setting its component parts or features in one order of importance, a second setting them in a second order, and so on. In fine, the accredited achievement is *initially* variously describable. (IV) The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance. For convenience I shall call the concept of any such achievement "open" in character.¹

These seem to me to be the four most important necessary conditions to which any essentially contested concept must comply. But they do not define what it is to be a concept of this kind. 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. More simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it against other uses and to recognize that one's own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses. Still more simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively.

¹ We might re-write conditions (III) and (IV) above as follows:—(IIIa) Any essentially contested concept is liable initially to be *ambiguous*, since a given individual P_1 may apply it having in mind description D_1 of the achievement which the concept accredits, and his application of it may be accepted (or rejected) by other people who have in mind different descriptions, D_2 , D_3 , etc., of the accredited achievement. But this *initial* ambiguity must be considered in conjunction with condition (V) below. (IVa) Any essentially contested concept is *persistently* vague, since a proper use of it by P_1 in a situation S_1 affords no sure guide to anyone else as to P_1 's next, and perhaps equally proper, use of it in some future situation S_2 .

I will now discuss these five conditions in terms of my artificial example. There can be no question but that my concept of "the champions" is appraisive; nor, I think, that it is used both aggressively and defensively. This disposes of conditions (I) and (V). What of condition (II) that the achievement of championship (by playing the game best) must be of an internally complex character? Are all worthwhile achievements essentially internally complex? That they are seems to me as certain as any statement about values and valuation can be; and although I admit that there is plenty to be said and asked about why this is so, I don't think it necessary to embark on such discussion here. To meet condition (III)—the variously describable character of the achievement which the term "the champions" accredits—we may imagine that our championship is to be gained by playing a game something like skittles. The only action it demands from all members of any contesting side is a kind of bowling at certain objects. But such bowling can be judged, from the point of view of method, strategy and style, in a number of different ways: particular importance may be attached to speed or to direction or to height or to swerve or spin. But no one can bowl *simply* with speed, or simply with good direction or simply with height or swerve or spin: *some* importance, however slight, must, in practice, be attached to each of these factors, for all that the supporters of one team will speak of its "sheer-speed attack" (apparently neglecting other factors), while supporters of other teams coin phrases to emphasise other factors in bowling upon which their favoured team concentrates its efforts.

To cover condition (IV)—that the achievement our concept accredits is persistently vague—let us consider the particular case of the team which concentrates its efforts, and reposes its hopes for the championship, on a "sheer-speed attack". The task facing them is: can they put up an outstanding performance in this method and style of bowling, a performance which will make all other methods and styles look "not really bowling at all"? To succeed in this the

bowlers in our team must evidently pay attention to circumstances, and modify their method of play as circumstances suggest or dictate. (We may imagine that certain grounds—or alleys—and certain lights are much more obviously favourable to “sheer-speed attack” than others.) But whatever the circumstances, our team strives to be acclaimed as “the champions” in virtue of its characteristic (“sheer-speed”) method and style of bowling. In ostensibly favourable circumstances such acclamation could be backed by the judgment: “They are the champions—they have shown us what speed bowling *really* is.” In ostensibly unfavourable circumstances it could be backed by: “They are the champions—they have shown us what speed can do when everything seems against it.” 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.

So much for the four most important necessary pre-conditions² of a concept’s being of essentially contested

² Are all four conditions necessary? I suggest that proof of this could be found along the following lines. Given conditions (II) and (III) we have the sort of situation where a multi-dimensional description or classification of certain facts is possible. But in any such situation, specific evidential or methodological reasons apart, it would be absurd to prefer one style of possible description or classification to the others. But substitute achievements for facts, i.e., an appraisive concept or classification for a purely naturalistic one, and the absurdity disappears, since for the purpose of moral or aesthetic persuasion one style of description or classification may very definitely be preferable to another which is *logically* equipollent with it. Here is a strong reason for thinking that condition (I) is necessary. But even in a situation which conforms to conditions (I), (II) and (III) it is conceivable that experience should establish *one* style of description as, again for the purpose of moral or aesthetic persuasion, universally more acceptable than any other. This result could hardly be expected, however, if condition (IV) be added, i.e., if the kind of achievement which our concept or classification accredits is, in my sense, an “open” one; for what this condition ensures is, in terms of my artificial example, that *to-morrow’s* circumstances may bring out hitherto latent virtues in the play of *any* of the contestant teams. There remains the possibility that the addition of condition (IV) renders condition (I) superfluous. This could be maintained if, and only if, instances could be produced of a concept which conforms to my conditions (II), (III) and (IV) and which is yet wholly non-appraisive in character. My suspicion is, however, that no *purely* naturalistic concept will be found conforming to my conditions (II), (III) and (IV).

character, and for the further condition (V) which defines what it is to be a concept of this kind. But at this point the following objections may be raised: "All your definition does is to suggest the kind of situation in which people could claim to be using a concept of the kind you call 'essentially contested'. But the kind of situation you have described is indistinguishable from those situations in which people engage in apparently endless contests as to the right application of some epithet or slogan, which *in fact serves simply to confuse two different concepts about whose proper application no one need have contested at all.* The important question is how are these all-too-familiar cases to be distinguished from the artificial example which you have presented? To all appearances your concept of 'the champions' not only denotes consistently different sets of individuals (teams) according as it is used by different parties (supporters); it also connotes different achievements (in the way of different methods, strategies and styles favoured by the different teams) according as it is used by different groups of supporters. *Is there, then, any real ground for maintaining that it has a single meaning, that could be contested?*"

The easy answer to this objection is that no one would conceivably refer to one team among others as "the champions" unless he believed his team to be playing better than all the others *at the same game.* The context of any typical use of "the champions" shows that it has thus far an unequivocal meaning as between its different (contestant) users. But to this answer the critic may retort: "But exactly the same situation appears to obtain wherever men dispute over the right use of what proves eventually to be a thoroughly confused concept, or better a thoroughly confusing term which cloaked the possibly perfectly consistent use of two or more concepts which only needed to be discriminated. Your definition of what it is to be an essentially contested concept may in a sense cover the kind of facts which your artificial example is meant to illustrate, but among them may well be the fact of a persistent

delusion, viz., the deluded belief that the different teams *are* all playing the same game."

It turns out, then, that this objection is a request, not for further refinement of our definition of an essentially contested concept, but for an indication of the conditions in which the continued use of any such concept, as above defined, can be defended. And this is a perfectly fair request, since *it is always reasonable to urge the parties contesting the rightful use of such a concept to bethink themselves with all seriousness, whether they are really alleging the same achievement.* For instance, in our artificial example, might it not simply be said that T_1 is trying to put on a first class performance of (primarily) fast bowling; T_2 of (primarily) straight bowling, and so on, and that these quite proper but quite different aims of our different teams are not essentially, but only accidentally and as a result of persistent confusion, mutually contesting and contested?

I shall at once sketch the outlines of the required defence in terms of my artificial example, but must add that until it is interpreted in the live examples which follow, it may well seem somewhat specious. In defence, then, of the continued use of the concepts "championship" and "the champions" in my example I urge: each of my teams could properly be said to be contesting for the *same* championship if, in every case, its peculiar method and style of playing had been derived by a process of imitation and adaptation from an *exemplar*, which might have the form either of one prototype team of players, or of a succession (or tradition) of teams. 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, and hence that our different teams should have come to hold their very different conceptions of how the game should be played. To this we should add that recognition or

acceptance of the exemplar's achievement must have that "open" character which we have ascribed to every essentially contested concept. A certain kind of worth-while achievement was presented, and our teams have all been seeking to revive or reproduce it in their play. But there can be no question of any purely mechanical repetition or reproduction of it. To follow an exemplar is to exert oneself to revive its (or his) way of doing things, not only to the utmost of one's ability, but to the utmost that circumstances, favourable or unfavourable, will allow.

Let us now illustrate this situation in terms of Team T_1 (with its "sheer-speed" attack) and its supporters. All members and supporters of this team are at one with all members and supporters of all other teams in acknowledging the authority of the exemplar; but in appraising the exemplar's achievement members and supporters of T_1 have concentrated their attention, primarily and predominantly, on the one factor of speed. They have conscientiously sustained and perhaps even advanced the exemplar's way of playing as circumstances permitted in terms of their own appraisal of it. Members and supporters of T_1 are therefore assured that T_1 has played the game as it should be played. But just the same holds true, of course, of all the other contestant teams, together with their supporters.

At this point it is worth recalling that in our artificial example championship is not awarded on any quantitative system; we can now see how difficult, if not impossible, such a system would be to work, given the other conditions which we have laid down. For who is to say whether T_1 's sustaining and advancing of the exemplar's way of playing is a better ("truer" or "more orthodox") achievement than that of, say, T_2 , whose members have no doubt contended with quite different difficulties and exploited quite different advantages in their concentration upon the different factor of direction? In general, it would seem to be quite impossible to fix a *general principle* for deciding which of two such teams has really "done best"—done best in its own peculiar way to advance or sustain the characteristic excellence revealed in the exemplar's play.

We have thus taken two steps in defence of the continued use of our essentially contested concept "the champions":—

(I) We have seen that each of our teams claims—and can point to facts which appear to support its claim—that its style of play embodies "the true line of descent" or "the right method of development" of the exemplar's play.

(II) 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. Nevertheless, recalling the internally complex, and variously describable, and peculiarly "open" character of the exemplar's achievement, 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. Thus Team T_1 could hardly have developed its sheer-speed attack to its present excellence had it not been aspiring to convert supporters from Team T_2 , which in its turn could hardly have developed its skill in respect of direction had it not been aspiring to convert supporters . . . and so on for all the contestant teams. This result of continuous competition does not justify the claims of any one of our teams; but it might be said to justify, other things being equal, the combined employment of the essentially contested concept "the champions" by *all* the contesting teams.

Two comments on this line of defence may be added.

(a) It has an obvious affinity to the now well-known theory of "competition" between rival scientific hypotheses, a theory which certainly does much to explain the apparently inherent progressiveness of the natural sciences. But its differences from this theory are as important as its affinity

to it. Competition between scientific hypotheses works successfully largely because there are acknowledged general methods or principles for deciding between rival hypotheses, for all that these methods or principles may never be completely formalized or finally agreed. But 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. (b) The above defence of the continued use of an essentially contested concept is conditional in the extreme. It is introduced as a possibility, which the facts in certain cases may at once preclude. For example it might turn out that continued use of two or more rival versions of an essentially contested concept would have the effect of utterly frustrating the kind of activity and achievement which it was the job of this concept (in and through all the rival contestant versions) to appraise—and through positive appraisal to help to sustain. Even in more favourable cases, the question whether in fact competition between rival claimants has sustained or developed the original exemplar's achievement to the optimum, will usually be a very difficult one to decide. This is the first import of the phrase "other things being equal" in this connexion. But again, even where the question could be answered affirmatively with regard to the kind of achievement in question, the cost of sustaining and developing it competitively may well be judged too high in the light of its more general effects. In this connexion, our artificial example from the happy field of sport was an unusually favourable one. It suggested one main and at least harmless result—the sustaining and developing of a number of competitively connected athletic skills. But suppose the pursuit of championship in our example were to result in the impoverishment of all the players and supporters (through neglect of their proper business), or in the formation of savage political cleavages between different teams and their supporters—than our reaction to it would be very different. In general, the above defence of the continued use of any essentially

contested concept is evidently subject to very stringent conditions.

To sum up this part of our discussion. Conditions (I) to (V) as stated on pages 171-2 above give us the formally defining conditions of essential contestedness. But **they 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.** In order to make this distinction, which is in effect to justify the continued use of any essentially contested concept, it is necessary to add two further conditions. These are **(VI)** the derivation of any such concept from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept, and **(VII)** the probability or plausibility, in appropriate senses of these terms, of the claim that the continuous competition for acknowledgement as between the contestant users of the concept, enables the original exemplar's achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion.

SOME LIVE EXAMPLES.

The examples I choose are the concepts of Art, of Democracy, of Social Justice, and that of the adherence to, or participation in, a particular religion. **None of these concepts conforms with perfect precision to the seven conditions I have set out above.** But do they conform to my conditions sufficiently closely for us to agree that their essential contestedness explains—or goes a very long way towards explaining—the ways they function in characteristic aesthetic, political and religious arguments? This is the test question which I believe my account of them will satisfy.

Of the concepts just mentioned the fourth seems to me to satisfy most nearly perfectly my several conditions. Consider, as illustration of it, the phrase “a Christian life”. Clearly this is an appraisive term; on reflection it can be seen, equally clearly, to signify an achievement that is

internally complex, variously describable and “open” in the senses which I have given to those terms. Too often, if not always, it is used both “aggressively” and “defensively”. That any proper use of it conforms to the first of my two justifying conditions, (VI) above, is obvious; whilst that it conforms to my condition (VII) might be agreed (though no doubt with many different qualifying conditions) not only by liberal Christians, but by liberal spirits of other (or even of no) religious persuasions.

The most questionable case is that of its conformity to condition (V). Is the phrase “a Christian life” necessarily used both aggressively and defensively? The familiar pattern of the history of Christianity is certainly that of one dominant church, in any area or in any epoch, *and* usually a number of dissenting or protesting sects. But is there anything inherently necessary in this pattern? Is the Christian kingdom, here below also, essentially one of many mansions? Conformity to my conditions (I) to (IV) and to my condition (VI) cannot be said, in this or in any instance, to *entail* such a conclusion. But it makes it extremely *likely* that such a conclusion will be found to hold; and given its historical development to date—which is something that Christianity (in this like any other great religion) can never possibly shed—its contested character, or the aggressive and defensive use of many of its key doctrines and principles, would appear to belong inherently to it *now*.

Having said this I do not propose to press this example any further, partly because of my ignorance of the relevant apologetic literature, but chiefly because the most important question it raises is one which I shall try to deal with later in a more general form. This is the question, which would be raised by any positivistically minded critic of any religion, whether the so-called arguments by which adherents of one creed seek to convert adherents of other creeds are in any proper sense arguments at all.

Let us next consider the concept of Art. As with our previous example so here, clarification requires that we view

this concept with the historian's as much as with the logician's eye; for perhaps the most interesting fact about it is the brevity of its history, the comparatively recent date of its "arrival" as a theoretical concept. Nevertheless, during that history it has succeeded in being continuously contested, and for reasons that are not hard to find. Running again through our five necessary conditions of essential contestedness we can easily agree: (I) Art as we use the term to-day is mainly, if not exclusively, an appraisive term. (II) The kind of achievement it accredits is always internally complex. (III) This achievement has proved to be variously describable—largely, if not solely, because at different times and in different circles it has seemed both natural and justifiable to describe the phenomena of Art with a dominant emphasis now on the work of Art (Art-product) itself, now on the response of the audience or spectator, now on the aim and inspiration of the artist, now on the tradition within which the artist works, now on the general fact of communication between the artist, *via* art-product, and audience. (IV) Artistic achievement, or the persistence of artistic activity is always "open" in character in the sense that, at any one stage in its history, no one can predict or prescribe what new development of current art-forms may come to be regarded as of properly artistic worth. (V) Intelligent artists and critics will readily agree that the term Art and its derivatives are used, for the most part, both aggressively and defensively.

I must admit that my first justifying condition—derivation from a single generally acknowledged exemplar (in this case a single tradition of art) cannot be simply or directly applied. Clearly there have been different, and very often quite independent, artistic traditions. Nevertheless, I think that in any intelligent discussion of works of art or of artistic valuation, it is fairly easy to see what particular artistic tradition or set of traditions is being regarded as the "exemplar term". Finally it could at least be argued that the stimulating effects of competition between different aesthetic viewpoints, or different styles of description of

aesthetic values, have provided a sufficient justification of the continued use of Art as an essentially contested term.

I think it is worth adding, to meet the objections of those who would decry the term Art as a useless blanket-term, that a supporting account could be given of the actual use in criticism of a number of relatively specific aesthetic terms. I will mention only one example: the notion of colouration. From different aesthetic viewpoints colouration, considered as an appraisive term, may be used to refer predominantly either to the arrangement of pigments on a surface, or to the use of pigments to convey certain *other* spacial effects, *e.g.*, massiveness, distance, etc., or to their use to represent or suggest certain forms found in nature, or to express something peculiar (individual, novel, important) in the artist's general way of seeing things. This being so, it is not difficult to see that the notion of colouration is in fact used in an essentially contested manner, even if this fact is not admitted by the majority of critics and aestheticians.

Coming now to the concept of Democracy, I want first to make clear what uses of it, in political discussion, are *not* here to be discussed. Sometimes in a political argument actual political conditions or actions are referred to and then the question is put: "Can you call *that* democratic?" or "Is *this* an example of your democracy?" But questions of actual practice, vindicating or belying certain particular uses of the term "democracy" are not here our concern. Again, when commending certain political arrangements or in criticizing others, political spokesmen sometimes make use of *theoretical* considerations, (drawn perhaps from political science, perhaps from political philosophy) which appear to show that from the arrangements in question democratic results can be expected to follow, or alternatively are most unlikely to, or even could not conceivably follow. But such theory-inspired uses or mentions of the term democracy are not here our concern. Both the above uses presuppose a **more elementary use** in which it can be said to express (and

usually to-day to express approval of) certain political aspirations which have been embodied in countless slave, peasant, national and middle-class revolts and revolutions, as well as in scores of national constitutions and party records and programmes. These aspirations are evidently centred in a demand for increased equality: or, to put it negatively, they are advanced against governments and social orders whose aim is to prolong gross forms of *inequality*. To be sure, when thus conceived, the concept of democracy is extremely vague, but not, I think, hopelessly so, as is, for instance, the concept of the "cause of right". Its vagueness reflects its actual inchoate condition of growth; and if we want to understand its condition, and control its practical and logical vagaries, the first step, I believe, is to recognize its essentially contested character. Let us therefore once again run through my list of defining and justifying conditions.

(I) The concept of democracy which we are discussing is appraisive; indeed many would urge that during the last one hundred and fifty years it has steadily established itself as *the* appraisive political concept *par excellence*. Questions of efficiency and security apart, the primary question on any major policy-decision has come to be: Is it democratic? By contrast, the concept of liberty, or more accurately, of particular liberties deserving protection irrespective of their democratic spread or appeal, appears steadily to have lost ground.

(II) and (III) 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. I list as examples of different aspects (a) Democracy means primarily the power of the majority of citizens to choose (and remove) governments—a power which would seem to involve, anyhow in larger communities, something like the institution of parties competing for political leadership; (b) Democracy means primarily equality of all citizens, irrespective of race, creed,

sex, etc., to attain to positions of political leadership and responsibility ; (c) Democracy means primarily the continuous active participation of citizens in political life at all levels, i.e., it is real when, and in so far as, there really is *self-government*.

Of these descriptions (b) and (c) emphasize features of democracy which clearly can exist in greater or less degree and are therefore liable to be differently placed for relative importance. But does not description (a) state an absolute requirement and therefore a necessary condition of paramount importance—perhaps even a sufficient condition—of a democratic society? We of the western tradition commonly claim this; but I believe our claim to be confused, for all that our democratic practice may have been, to date, none the worse for that.³

Suppose a society which answers in high degree to the conditions required by descriptions (b) and (c). In such a society government might reasonably be expected to show itself responsive, in considerable degree, to movements of popular opinion. Yet this result does not necessarily require constitutionally recognized means (*e.g.*, universal and secret ballot and the existence of competitive parties) for the wholesale removal of governments. The practice of certain churches which claim to satisfy proper democratic demands,

³ I say confused, because it seems to me that the claim that description (a) is of absolute, paramount (and perhaps also of logically sufficient) character, is commonly grounded upon two *liberal* principles or beliefs, *viz.*, (I) that those political liberties that are enjoyed by all (or almost all) our citizens deserve protection primarily because *all* traditionally accepted liberties (no matter how restricted the enjoyment of them) are things that *prima facie* deserve protection, and (II) that the existence of a wide variety of liberties (enjoyed by different ranges of our citizens) has been historically and remains to-day a *necessary* condition of our specifically *democratic* values and achievements. Both these claims, I would say, reflect our grasp of a particular historical truth of immense importance, *viz.*, as to how democracy has taken root and flourished in the west. But if they are put forward as universal political truths expressing the necessary conditions of *any* genuinely democratic aspirations or achievements, then they are surely open to question. To many people in the world to-day they must seem indeed, not so much questionable as utterly—and in a sense insultingly—irrelevant to their actual situation. What is the relevance of a Burkian philosophy of political liberties to the great majority of Asians and Africans to-day?

here shows a curious analogy to those governments which insist on their democratic character while denying their citizens the right of "free election" on the western pattern. For this reason, as well as for others which space forbids me to elaborate here, I conclude that the popular conception of democracy conforms to my conditions (II) and (III) for essential contestedness.

(IV) The concept of democracy which we are discussing is "open" in character. Politics being the art of the possible, democratic targets will be raised or lowered as circumstances alter, and democratic achievements are always judged in the light of such alterations. (V) The concept of democracy which we are discussing is used both aggressively and defensively. This hardly requires discussion—except by those who repudiate the suggestion that there is any single general use of the term "democracy". My reply here is that such people neglect the possibility of a single general use made up, essentially, of a number of mutually contesting and contested uses of it. (VI) These uses claim the authority of an exemplar, *i.e.*, of a long tradition (perhaps a number of historically independent but sufficiently similar traditions) of demands, aspirations, revolts and reforms of a common *anti-inegalitarian* character; and to see that the vagueness of this tradition in no way affects its influence as an exemplar, we need only recall how many and various political movements claim to have drawn their inspiration from the French Revolution. (VII) Can we add, finally, that continuous competition for acknowledgement between rival uses of the popular concept of democracy seems likely to lead to an *optimum* development of the vague aims and confused achievements of the democratic tradition? Is it not, rather, more likely to help fan the flames of conflict, already sufficiently fed by other causes, between those groups of men and nations that contest its proper use? It is not the job of the present analysis, or of political philosophy in general, to offer particular predictions or advice on this kind of issue. But our present analysis does prompt the question, for which parallels could be

provided by my other live examples, and which I shall try to answer in generalized form below, *viz.*, In what way should we expect current dog-fights over the concept of democracy to be affected if its essentially contested character were recognized by all concerned?

Whereas the concepts of religion, of art and of democracy would seem to admit, under my condition (III), of an indefinite number of possible descriptions, the concept of social justice as popularly used to-day seems to admit of only two.⁴ Of these the first rests on the ideas of merit and commutation: justice consists in the institution and application of those social arrangements whereby the meritorious individual receives his commutative due. The second rests upon, in the sense of presupposing, the ideas (or ideals) of co-operation, to provide the necessities of a worth-while human life, and of distribution of products to assure such a life to all who co-operate. It is natural to take these two descriptions as characteristic of two facets of contemporary morality, which might be labelled liberal and socialist respectively. But in fact these two facets would seem to appear in any morality or moral teaching worthy of the name: witness, *e.g.*, the opposed lessons of the parable of the talents and the parable of the vineyard, or, on a humbler plane, contrast the encouragement one gives to children now to show their worth, now to pitch in for the sake of the family or group or side.

It is the sheer duality of these opposed uses that is of particular interest, since it suggests a bridge between those appraisive concepts which are variously describable and essentially contested and those whose everyday use appears to be uniquely describable and universally acknowledged. Such are the central concepts of ethics; and the bearing upon these of my suggested new grouping of concepts is the third question which I reserve for separate discussion below.

⁴ Cf. my "Liberal Morality and Social Morality" in *Philosophy*, Vol. XXIV, No. 91, 1950, pp. 318-334.

OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS.

I shall now assume that each of my live examples conforms sufficiently closely to my conditions (I)–(VII) for it to be agreed that my proposed new grouping of concepts goes some way towards explaining them. But what further results can we expect from it? To answer this I turn to the three questions which I left outstanding in the previous section, on the ground that they would usefully admit of a more generalized treatment.

(I) Are the endless disputes to which the use of any essentially contested concept give rise *genuine* disputes, *i.e.*, of such a character that the notions of evidence, cogency and rational persuasion can properly be applied to them? This is, in effect, the question whether there is such a thing as “the logic” of *conversion* either in the religious or aesthetic or in the political and moral fields. Are *some* conversions in any of these fields of such a kind that they can be described as logically justified or defensible? Or on the contrary, are conversions in these fields always changes of view-point which can indeed be effected or engineered by appropriate methods, and can be causally explained by adducing relevant facts and generalizations, but only in such ways that the idea of logical “justification” is inappropriate to them? Our previous discussion has sufficiently emphasised one all-important point: *viz.*, that if the notion of logical justification can be applied only to such theses and arguments as can be presumed capable of gaining in the long run universal agreement, the disputes to which the uses of any essentially contested concept give rise are not genuine or rational disputes at all. Our first question, then, is to decide whether conformity to this condition—the possibility of obtaining universal agreement—provides a necessary criterion of the genuineness of arguments or disputes of all kinds. Now an affirmative answer to this question certainly requires some special defence; for the notion of possible ultimate universal agreement is a highly sophisticated one and does not figure among the familiarly recognized criteria

of rational justification. Moreover, I would claim that those who have urged us to accept an affirmative answer here have entirely neglected the existence of essentially contested concepts, and have failed to examine in any detail the peculiar structures of the arguments to which their uses give rise. Pending such examination, therefore, I conclude that this first possible form of the objection need not cause us any great worry.

But now the objection can be put on more general grounds, *viz.*, that, as we have explicitly confessed, 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". If no such principle can be found or fixed, then how can the arguments of the contestants in such a dispute be subject to logical appraisal? My answer is that even where a general principle may be unobtainable for deciding, in a manner that would or might conceivably win ultimate agreement, which of a number of contestant uses of a given concept is its "best use", 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.

To show how this is possible let me revert, yet once again, to my artificial example and consider the supporters of three contestant teams T_1 , T_2 , and T_3 . And for simplicity let us assume that the style of play of T_2 can be said to stand mid-way between the styles of T_1 and T_3 . Let us recall, too, that **in each of these groups of supporters there will always be wavering or marginal individuals, who are more than usually aware of the appeals—the characteristic excellences—of teams other than that which at the moment they favour and support.** Let us concentrate on an individual I_2 , at present a marginal supporter of T_2 . A particular performance of Team T_1 , or some shrewd appraisive comment from one of T_1 's supporters suddenly makes him realize much more completely than heretofore the justice of T_1 's claim to be sustaining and advancing the original exemplar team's style of play in "the best possible

way". This tips the scale for him and he is converted to being a supporter of T_1 . But now we may assume that the same particular performance (or shrewd appraisive comment) has had a comparable—though not so dramatically effective—influence upon other staunch supporters of T_2 . It has slightly shaken them, we might say. **At least it has made them aware that, in comparable circumstances T_2 must make a comparably effective adaptation of its style of play if it is to keep their unwavering support.** Further, we may assume that although supporters of T_3 are less shaken by the particular performance, they have at least been made to "sit up and take notice"; and similarly, with decreasing degrees of force for supporters of other teams whose styles of play are still remoter from that of T_1 .

Put less artificially, what I am claiming is that a certain piece of evidence or argument put forward by one side in an apparently endless dispute can be recognized to have a definite logical force, even by those whom it entirely fails to win over or convert to the side in question; and that when this is the case, the conversion of a hitherto wavering opponent of the side in question can be seen to be *justifiable*—not simply expectable in the light of known relevant psychological or sociological laws—given the waverer's previous state of information and given the grounds on which he previously supported one side and opposed the other. It is for this reason that we can distinguish more or less intellectually respectable conversions from those of a more purely emotional, or yet those of a wholly sinister kind. To be sure, our previous wavering opponent of one use of an essentially contested concept would not be justified in transferring his allegiance in the circumstances outlined if he were able, for an indefinite length of time, to withhold his support *from any of its possible uses, i.e.*, to take up an entirely uncommitted attitude. But as in our artificial example, so in life this possibility is often precluded. The exigencies of living commonly demand that "he who is not for us is against us", or that he who hesitates to throw in his support or make his contribution on one side or the

other is lost—not just to one of the sides that might have claimed his support—but to the game and to the day. From this point of view “the logic of conversion” from one contested use of an essentially contested concept to another is on all-fours with the logic of every unique decision: and as in the latter more general case, so in that which concerns us here, there can be little question but that greater or lesser degrees of rationality can be properly and naturally attributed to one continued use, or one change of use, than to others.

Two points may be added to reinforce this account. It has usually been asserted by “attitude-moralists” that the sole significant content of any moral dispute must concern the facts, the empirically testable facts, of the matter in question. It is important to contrast this assertion with our account of the conversion of the individual I_2 . What I_2 recognizes in my account, is a fact if you like, but not a mere empirical observandum. It is, rather, the fact that a particular achievement (of T_1) revives and realizes, as it were in fuller relief, some already recognized feature of an already valued style of performance, i.e., that of the original exemplar. Because of this particular performance I_2 sees, or claims to see, more clearly and fully *why* he has acknowledged and followed the exemplar’s style of performance all along. The scales are tipped for him not, or at least not only, by some psychologically explainable kink of his temperament, not by some observandum whose sheer occurrence all observers must acknowledge, but by his recognition of a value which, given his particular marginal appraisive situation, is conclusive for him, although it is merely impressive or surprising or worth noticing for others.

While insisting that there may be this much objectivity in the grounds of any particular conversion, we may nevertheless agree with “attitude-moralists” that fundamental differences of attitude, of a kind for which no logical justification can be given, must also lie back of the kind of situation which we have just discussed. Why should one

style of play (as in our artificial example) appeal to one group of supporters and another style to a second group? Why should one facet of Democracy or of the Christian Message appeal so strongly to one type or group or communion, another to a second? At any given stage in the history of the continued uses of any essentially contested concept, it will no doubt be necessary to call upon psychological or sociological history or the known historical facts of a person's or group's background, to explain their present preferences and adherences. But to admit this is not to deny the existence, or at least the possibility, of logically appraisable factors in an individual's use, or change of use, of a particular contested concept.

Our second outstanding question may be stated as follows: **In what ways should we expect recognition of the essentially contested character of a given concept to affect its future uses by different contestant parties?**

Two preliminary points must be made: (I) It is important to distinguish clearly such recognition—a somewhat sophisticated “higher order” intellectual feat—from the everyday “lower order” recognition that one is using a given concept both aggressively and defensively. The difference is between recognizing that one has, and presumably will continue to have, opponents, and recognizing that this is an essential feature of the activity one is pursuing. The obvious advantage of the “higher-order” recognition is (assuming my present analysis to be acceptable) that it makes the parties concerned aware of an important truth. But this will be a truth of high-order, whose significance can best be understood in terms of its important everyday applications. The answer we are seeking must enable us to meet the following questions: How will a Christian of denomination X be likely to be affected in respect of his intellectual allegiance to X (and consequently repudiation of Y and Z) by the recognition which we are here discussing? Similarly, how will the student of the arts be affected by recognizing that different groups of critics not only disagree, but in the nature of the case must be expected to disagree in

their fundamental view-points? And so on for the other cases. (II) It is also important to stress that the results with which we are here concerned are not to be of a predictable or causally explainable character. The practical and theoretical operations which recognition of a concept as essentially contested makes possible are logically appraisable and justifiable operations, such as we would expect from a reasonable being, for all that, for special psychological or social causes, a given individual may fail to entertain them. It is therefore neither redundant nor irrelevant to insist that examination of these results is an important part of our analysis.

Part of the answer to our question seems to be this. 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. 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.

But as against this optimistic view the following darker considerations might be urged. So long as contestant users of any essentially contested concept believe, however deludedly, that their own use of it is the only one that can command honest and informed approval, they are likely to persist in the hope that they will ultimately persuade and convert all their opponents by logical means. But once let the truth out of the bag—i.e., the essential contestedness of the concept in question—then 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.

This consideration might give us pause until we recall that spokesmen of Reason have always brought peril as well as light to their hearers. The consequences of the present requirement—recognition of essential contestedness in appropriate cases—is in this respect nothing extraordinary. In any case the above objection gives too much credit to the “reasonableness” of those who will employ reason only given the prospect of eventual knock-out victory. The relevant fact is, rather, that evil men always want quick victories; they prefer the elimination of opponents to-day to their conversion—or even their adequate indoctrination—to-morrow. Furthermore, what is being brought to our notice by the present objection 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.

My last outstanding question may be put as follows: What are the bearings of my suggested new grouping of concepts upon the central normative and appraisive concepts of ethics? Or, more specifically: if certain very important appraisive concepts (e.g., those of democracy and social justice) turn out to be of an essentially contested character, how should this affect the common assumption that the central concepts of ethics are uniquely describable and such as to command universal assent?

Clearly I cannot attempt even to state, still less to defend, a convincing answer to these questions, in the space left at my disposal. They are, nevertheless, probably the most important questions that the present paper raises: and I shall therefore attempt a brief further restatement of them, to show their bearing upon the terms “moral goodness” and “duty”. Then I shall leave my readers to draw their own conclusions and (should they be interested) to guess at mine.

(a) Moralists commonly claim that, among the many over-lapping senses of the word “good”, we can all detect *one* use of it, its fundamental use in moral discussion, about

whose propriety in any particular situation no two rational (or morally developed) persons will disagree, given that they share precisely the same factual knowledge of the situation in question. Certain saintly characters, or supremely noble actions, *e.g.*, self-sacrifice, are usually cited as illustrations. But these, like other supreme sources of illumination, are apt, through their unquestionable force, only to intensify the surrounding darkness. *Some* of our moral appraisals command universal assent, but by no means all do so. It is of the first importance to insist that we also use the word "good" (or its near-equivalents and derivatives) with a definitely moral, but just as definitely questionable force: witness such phrases as "a good Christian", "a good patriot", "a good democrat", "a good painter" (when we mean a sincere, sensitive, intelligent, always rewarding—but not necessarily a "great" or a "fine" painter), "a good husband," and so on. In all these uses, it seems perfectly clear, our concept of the activity in and through which the man's goodness is said to be manifested, is of an essentially contested character. "He was a good Christian" says X, to which Y replies tartly "I suppose you mean he was a good Churchman". "He was a good husband" says X, and Y replies "Agreed that he was faithful, sober, hard-working and never raised his hand or his voice, BUT" Now I have yet to read a philosophical moralist who took seriously the difficulty which these examples illustrate.

(b) To do one's duty in a particular situation involves, we would all agree, some reference to what any other rational being would do "in a similar situation". But many of our duties arise out of our adherence to one particular use of an essentially contested concept, *e.g.*, social justice. Now the question arises: Shall reference to such adherence be counted as a necessary part of any "similar situation"? If so, then the universality criterion of duty is rendered trivial: if not, then, anyhow in a great many very important issues, it becomes inapplicable. But can either of these results satisfy any perceptive and serious moralist?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I should like in conclusion to anticipate two lines of criticism: (I) It may be complained that despite all its references to "reasonableness", to the "logic of conversion", etc., this paper is only a disguised betrayal of reason, a further contribution to what Mr. Hampshire has so aptly called "the new obscurantism". To find reasonableness in the pursuit of inevitably endless conflicts—is not this as paradoxical and as dangerous as to find it in the dictates of the heart and the blood or in the actual march of history? Reason, according to so many great philosophical voices, is essentially something which demands and deserves universal assent—the manifestation of whatever makes for unity among men and/or the constant quest for such beliefs as could theoretically be accepted as satisfactory by all men. This account of reason may be adequate so long as our chief concern is with the use or manifestation of reason in science; but it fails completely as a description of those elements of reason that make possible *discussions* of religious, political and artistic problems. Since the Enlightenment a number of brilliant thinkers seem positively to have exulted in emphasising the *irrational* elements in our thinking in these latter fields. My purpose in this paper has been to combat, and in some measure correct, this dangerous tendency. (II) It might be objected that my proposed new grouping of concepts simply presents in fake logical guise certain facts *about* our uses of a number of concepts—facts which might prove important to historians of ideas and sociologists, but which in no way explain to us what those uses *are*. In general (the supposed objector would continue) there are two quite distinct senses in which we can be said to understand a concept or theory or other tool of thought: first, the "logical" sense, in which to understand it means (*a*) to conform to, and (*b*) to be able to state, the rules governing its proper use; and second, the "historical" sense, in which to understand it means to know (something about) the whole gamut of conditions that have led to, and that now sustain,

the way we use it. Now to confuse these two senses is to prolong, in a rather sophisticated form, the "historicist fallacy". I agree, of course, that we must avoid confusing these two senses; but it seems to me equally important that we should see aright the connexion between them in different sorts of case.

This connexion is most tenuous, when the appropriate use of a concept would appear to mean simply, its use for deductive purposes: as, for example, when the meaning of any well-established concept of the physical sciences is equated with its predictive power. In this kind of case, 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. Admittedly, the use of some appraisive concepts may appear to be predictive; but this appearance is, I think, always deceptive, and is due to the fact that the *subject* of the appraisal (a man, a character, a practice, a *kind* of action) is such that any reference to it is always latently predictive. Thus, to call a man wise is in a sense to predict his behaviour; but it is not specifically in virtue of *what is predicted or predictable* about him that we term him "wise", nor yet because his known behaviour can be projected into the future, or for that matter into the unknown past. Similarly, we call X a good poet because he has written some good poems—but this involves no prediction that he will produce more, and no retrodiction to hidden (or burnt) adolescent masterpieces. Quite simply, to appraise something positively is to assert that it fulfils certain generally recognized standards: and this being so, we should expect clarification or improved understanding of an appraisive concept to be obtained in a very different way from clarification of any concept of science.

But how then can it be obtained? I shall simply assert my view that such clarification—if it is to be worthy of the name—must *include*, not simply consideration of different

uses of a given appraisive concept *as we use it to-day*, but consideration of such instances as display its growth and development. For, if we want to see *just what we are doing*, when we apply a given appraisive concept, then one way of learning this is by asking from what vaguer or more confused or more restricted version (or ancestor) our currently accepted version of the concept in question has been derived. Commonly we come to see more precisely what a given scientific concept means by contrasting its deductive powers with those of other closely related concepts: *in the case of an appraisive concept, we can best see more precisely what it means by comparing and contrasting our uses of it now with other earlier uses of it or its progenitors, i.e., by considering how it came to be.* If this be historicism, I cannot see that it is fallacious; and if it be acceptable in connexion with appraisive concepts, then it is well worth asking where the limit of its acceptability should be drawn.
