

# Political Concepts

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### What is a Concept?

Robert Adcock

University of California, Berkeley

(adcockr@uclink4.berkeley.edu)



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One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over  
*again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.*  
- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958, par.144)

Surveying the wide-ranging literature on concepts in search of an answer to the question “what is a concept?” quickly reveals the diversity of claims made by various users of the word.\* For Sartori, to have a concept is to have an ability to “distinguish A from whatever is not-A” (1984, p.74), while for Geach (1957), Putnam (1981), and Gillett (1992), the ability to use a word correctly is evidence for the possession of a concept. For Riggs, a concept is constituted by a “mental image” (1975, p.54), while for Putnam “possessing a concept is not a matter of possessing images” (1981, p.19). For Lambert and Shanks (1997) concepts are the “alphabet” of individual cognition, while for Gillett (1992) they are inherently public and intersubjective. For Sartori (1975, 1984) a full-fledged concept has a defining set of necessary characteristics, while for Freeden (1994) many full-fledged concepts entail quasi-contingent non-necessary characteristics.

This proliferation of claims reflects more than disagreement about the exact features of a commonly identified phenomenon, rather it reflects the fact that various users of the word ‘concept’ have been concerned with different cultural and cognitive phenomena. We must recognize that differing accounts of concepts inevitably rest upon prior, and often implicit, linguistic decisions about the use of the word ‘concept.’ Rather than advocating the exclusive use of one particular approach to concepts as “correct,” this paper strives to promote self-consciousness among scholars of the place of their own word use within a range of valid alternatives, some of which may also be relevant to the “conceptual” topics that concern them.

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In seeking to describe and understand some of the array of approaches to concepts that both connect and divide a series of disciplinary literatures I organize my discussion around reactions and relations to a simplified model of concepts that I call the “classical model.” This model treats concepts as cognitive entities that represent classes of objects in the world via their common necessary and sufficient features. As a background for the analysis I seek to show how features of this model appear in the etymological development of ‘concept’ and related words. I then point to the continuing importance of the classical model in contemporary use by considering definitions of ‘concept’ and related words offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) and *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1993).

After laying this groundwork I address potential problems with the classical model. First, I address the conflict between the classical model’s understanding of cognition and the discoveries and theories made in recent years by researchers in cognitive sciences. In addressing this research on cognition I also seek to understand how the interplay between empirical findings and research goals has shaped changing uses of the word ‘concept’ in this body of work. Secondly, I explore the wide use of the word ‘concept’ noting that it is used to discuss phenomena ranging from idiosyncratic cognitive entities to complex and contested structures of language-based meaning. In addition to broad questions about how ‘concept’ is used in relation to cognition and language this discussion addresses the particular issue of how the classical model might respond to this apparent discrepancy.

I then identify two distinct frameworks for talking about concepts that have played a prominent role in political science discussions: the *scientific-ideal*, and the *language-focused*. I explore these frameworks in terms of their relationship to work in other disciplines and their relationship to the classical model and its problems. I strive to draw out the points of contrast

between these frameworks in terms of basic perspectives and interests, as well as in terms of their development and employment of distinct and potentially conflicting uses of the word ‘concept.’ Again research goals are crucial here as the approach of users of these different frameworks have paralleled a distinction between prescriptive and descriptive treatments of concepts in political science that has been acknowledged and explored by the recent work of David Collier (Collier and Mahon, 1993; Collier and Levitsky, 1997). In this paper I build upon this initial insight by seeking to understand how these different strands in political science can be understood within a broad context of discussions of concepts, and different uses of the word ‘concept.’

## **PART ONE: *The “Classical Model of Concepts”***

### **Categories, Concepts, and Cognition**

The classical model of concepts provides an important tool for comparing and contrasting a range of discussions of concepts that differ in terms of basic assumptions, foci of interest, and their use of the word ‘concept.’ I construct this model of *concepts* upon an initial foundation that consists of the assumptions of the “classical” view of *categories* (Lakoff, 1987; Taylor, 1995; Collier and Mahon, 1993). The model then combines these assumptions with a focus on concepts in relation to individual cognition that produces an account of concepts functioning as mental symbols that represent external reality.

The classical model of concepts entails a particular approach to two key distinctions in the treatment of concepts. The first of these involves whether a given account of concepts presupposes the classical view of categories. John Taylor has neatly summarized the four main elements of this classical view as follows (1995, p.23-4):

1. Categories are defined in terms of a conjunction of necessary and sufficient features
2. Features are binary
3. Categories have clear boundaries
4. All members of a category have equal status

These elements give categories the basic features of mathematical sets, and hence enable their treatment in terms of a set-theoretical taxonomic hierarchy. These views about categories are important for the consideration of concepts precisely because many discussions of concepts treat them as entities that do, or at least should, satisfy these conditions.

The second distinction between different approaches to concepts would ideally group approaches on the basis of whether the entities or structures they discuss as “concepts” are cognitive or linguistic. However, for actual approaches this distinction is frequently somewhat blurred, and hence it is necessary to draw a looser distinction. Along these lines, I distinguish approaches to concepts with a *cognitive focus* from those with a *linguistic focus* on the basis of whether they focus on concepts primarily in relation to cognition, or primarily in relation to language.

It is the combination of particular responses to these two distinctions that forms the classical model of concepts. This model integrates the classical view of categories with a cognitive focus as it offers an account of what a concept is. The central feature of this model is a postulated representational relationship between sets of things in the world and concepts in the minds of individuals. Concepts are mental representations of the categories of the world. The clarity of this representation rests upon concepts consisting of lists of necessary and sufficient conditions that parallel the conditions the represented categories are assumed to meet. Concepts

in this model are discussed in terms of generality and abstraction because they summarize common features of sets of individual things.

The classical model of concepts as mental symbols involved in correspondences with sets of objects in the world is presented by George Lakoff (1987) as one of the many elements of the “objectivist paradigm.” Lakoff says that for the “objectivist,” “concepts are symbols that ... stand in correspondence to entities and categories in the real world” (1987, p.163). However, the classical model presented here is to be distinguished from Lakoff’s “objectivist concepts” because it does not entail any of the other philosophical views that are part of the “objectivist paradigm” (1987; see especially Part II). The classical model is limited in scope, and hence is neutral on questions that it does not directly address. Even if its proponents strongly tended towards a particular view of where concepts come from, this would not constitute a feature of the model itself. In contrast to Lakoff’s use of “objectivist,” my characterization of any particular discussion of concepts as “classical” does not determine a pre-established viewpoint on major epistemological and ontological issues. Calling an approach to concepts “classical” entails only that it presupposes the features of the classical view of categories within a focus on cognition.

### **Etymology: Evidence about the Development of the Classical Model**

We have seen above that the combination of classical categories and a focus on cognition brings ideas about common features, generality, and mental representation to prominence in the classical model of concepts. Exploring the development of these and related features in the etymology of ‘concept’ offers an illuminating backdrop against which to view the contemporary use of the word. In exploring this etymology I also seek to locate ‘concept’ within the broader

context of the history of a family of words including ‘conceive’, ‘conception’, ‘concept’, ‘conceptual’, ‘conceptualize’ and ‘conceptualization.’<sup>1</sup>

The family of words that contains ‘concept’ can be traced back to a common root in the Latin word *concupere* that is roughly parallel to the English ‘conceive’ (1989, Vol.III, p.649). It was itself formed by adding *con* (altogether) to the word *capere* (to take, seize, lay hold of) and meant “to take effectively, take to oneself, take in and hold.” The *O.E.D.* argues that most of the contemporary senses of ‘conceive’ were already developed in Latin. In addition *concupere* was the basis for a range of additional words that were to be important in the development in English of the family of words that interests us. The main Latin examples are *conceptum* (a thing conceived), *conception-em* (the noun of the action of *concupere*), and *conceptu-s* (a conceiving).

We find that ‘conceive’ and ‘conception’ were the first words of the family to develop in English, having entered the language by the start of the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The first known examples of the use of both words occur in the same work that is dated to 1300 (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p.649, 654). In this work both are used only in the particular sense, that they still have today, of referring to pregnancy. The first identified examples of the use of these words in relation to the mind appear within a century of this first extant use (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p.649-50, p.654). By the middle of 15<sup>th</sup> century the use of conception with relation to pregnancy had extended to include reference to that which is conceived, the embryo. However, once again the mental sense lags occurring in the 16<sup>th</sup> century only in explicit allusion with the pregnancy uses (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p. 654).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted the etymological information in this section all comes from the Oxford English Dictionary (1989; Vol. III, p. 649-655; Vol. XI, p. 520-24). All non-English words are in italics.

<sup>2</sup> Rather than being derived directly from Latin *concupere*, ‘conceive’ was adopted into English from the intermediary of the Old French *concev-eir* (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p.649). Likewise, the Latin *conception-em* was reflected in the Old French *conception* whose adoption yielded the English ‘conception’ (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p.654).



These earlier developments form a backdrop against which the linguistic developments of 17<sup>th</sup> century stand out. It is only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that ‘conception’ develops a fully fledged extension beyond use in regard to the faculty or action of forming an idea, to use to denote the idea or notion that is formed (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p.654). In addition the first extant example of the use of ‘concept’ in the sense that is predominant today is found in a source from 1663.<sup>3</sup> In this sense it denotes “the product of the faculty of conception; an idea of a class of objects, a general notion or idea” (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p. 653). The central point here is that while ‘conceive’ and ‘conception’ are found in a range of senses as early as the fourteenth century, the introduction of ‘concept,’ as well as the use of ‘conception’ specifically to discuss postulated mental products of conceiving crystallizes only in the mid to late seventeenth century.

These developments parallel important trends in 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosophy captured by the rising influence of empiricist philosophies of mind and language such as those of Hobbes and Locke. Indeed, the above linguistic developments, which are key to the classical model’s use of ‘concept’ in connection with a focus on cognition, draw partly upon philosophical investigations of the nature of thought. The *O.E.D.* recognizes distinct philosophical versions of ‘conception’ in both its faculty and product senses emerging in this century whose first known uses are located in the works of Hobbes (1989, Vol.III, p.654). Furthermore, it locates the origin of the predominant sense of ‘concept’ in logic and philosophy (1989, Vol.III, p.653).

Two features of British empiricist philosophy are especially noteworthy in regard to our concern with the classical model of concepts and its focus on cognition. The first is the

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<sup>3</sup> Initial uses of ‘concept’ in a now obsolete sense appear in English in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the first example of ‘concept’ identified by the dictionary dating to 1556 (1989, Vol.III, p.653). While *concept* existed in French at this time, the *O.E.D.* suggests that the primary origin for ‘concept’ was direct adaptation from the Latin *conceptum*. The earliest uses reflect a sense of ‘concept,’ which developed out of a refashioning of ‘conceit’ and reflected the 16<sup>th</sup> century uses of this word, that is considered obsolete by the dictionary with examples of its use limited to the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

argument that all mental content is ultimately grounded in the particulars of sensory perception. Hobbes' *Leviathan*, which first appeared in English bookshops in 1651 (1991, p.ix), begins with the chapter "Of Sense" in which Hobbes declares that "there is no conception in a mans mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of Sense" (1991, p.13). Locke's 1690 *Essay on Human Understanding* makes similar claims for the origins of thought in sense-perception. The second is the argument made by Hobbes and Locke that words function as signs that allow us to talk about units of thought that have originated independently of language through our sense-perceptions, and our mental treatment of those perceptions. Together these two trends strongly develop the classical model tendency to focus on concepts as elements of cognition while downplaying their connections to language. In addition, empiricism tends to add to the classical model a sense of causal movement that flows from things to concepts to language.

While Hobbes and Locke suggest a new sustained focus on thinking about cognition, the examples that the *O.E.D.* cites to describe the developments over the next two centuries of the meanings of the various words that concern us highlight further features of the classical model. The elements of abstraction, common features, and representation appear in two 1785 quotes from Reid's *Works*: "we have distinct conceptions of things common to many individuals" (1989, Vol.III, p.654); and "the Conception is opposed to the Intuition, for it is an universal representation or a representation of that which is common to a plurality of objects" (Trans. of Kant, 1989, Vol.III, p.654). Similarly Coleridge in 1830 stated that "a conception consists in a conscious act of the understanding, bringing any given object or impression into the same class with any number of other objects or impressions by means of some character common to all" (1989, Vol.III, p.654).

The continuing importance of the perception-conception link that strengthens the classical model focus on concepts as cognitive is suggested in the tendency to describe conception and perception as contrasting elements.<sup>4</sup> A quote from 1725 declared that “perception is the consciousness of an object when present, conception is the forming of an idea of the object whether present or absent” (1989, vol. III, p.654). Another example of mutually contrasting definitions is provided by a 1762 quote that “external things and their attributes are objects of perception: relations among things are objects of conception” (1989, vol. XI, p.523). The importance of links between discussions of conception and of perception is likewise emphasized by the 19<sup>th</sup> century modeling of the word ‘concept’ with the development of ‘percept.’ This development of ‘percept’ allowed for the meaning of ‘concept’ to be expounded in terms of its relation to, and difference from, ‘percepts’ in a series of uses that also highlight once again the classical model elements of representation and abstraction. Bowen’s *Logic* of 1864 stated that “a Percept or Intuition is a single representation... a Concept is a collective (general or universal) representation of a whole class of things” (1989, vol III, p.653); and, in 1876, Maudsley stated that “a percept is the abstract of sensation, so a concept is the abstract of percepts” (1989, vol. XI, p.522).

A subsequent burst of development of the family of words centered on ‘conceive’ is identified by the *O.E.D.* as beginning towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rather than adopting

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<sup>4</sup> The etymologies of these two families of words contain some interesting parallels. In addition to its role in forming the Latin root of conceive, the Latin word *capere* (to take, seize, lay hold of) was also combined with *per* (through, thoroughly) to form the Latin root of perceive—*percipere* (*O.E.D.*, Vol.XI, p.520). Just as *concipere* was the basis for a developed family of words in Latin, so *percipere* likewise led to *perceptum* (a thing perceived), *perception-em* (the noun of the action of percipere), and *perceptu-s* (a perceiving). Just as examples of both physical and mental senses of ‘conceive’ are found in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, so likewise both the physical and mental senses of ‘perceive’ present in its Latin root appear in examples of English from this period (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.XI, p.520). However, in contrast to ‘conceive’, over time the use of ‘perceive’ has narrowed as the sense of taking into possession or receiving in physical terms has become obsolete. One further point of parallel is with the development of ‘conception’ since ‘perception’ also develops the sense of a mental product or object only later than its mental action/faculty sense (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.XI, p.522-3).

or adapting words from Latin or French this linguistic development started with the existing English word – conceptual.<sup>5</sup> Examples of the compounds of conceptual with other words that were developed in this period include:<sup>6</sup> ‘conceptual thinking’ (1885), ‘conceptual scheme’ (1890), ‘conceptual knowledge’ (1890), ‘conceptual systems’ (1890), and ‘conceptual analysis’ (1896). New words formed in this period of linguistic innovation include: ‘conceptualizing’ (1878), ‘conceptually’ (1890), ‘conceptualize’ (1909), and ‘conceptualization’ (1909).

As with the earlier development of ‘concept’ and ‘conception’ there are key connections between these linguistic changes and a parallel intellectual focus on cognition. This time the particular location for the display of this prominent characteristic of the classical model was the emerging discipline of psychology.<sup>7</sup> The *O.E.D.* locates several of its first examples of these new words and compounds in works by the early psychologist William James. The importance to James of the classical model’s focus on concepts as cognitive rather than linguistic entities is suggested by his forceful reaction to language-focused uses of ‘concept.’ He was concerned that rather than discussing the mental “vehicles” of “thought” he conceived concepts to be, people were instead using ‘concept’ as “if it stood for the object of discourse.” In response James declared that such “looseness feeds such evasiveness in discussion that I shall avoid the use of the expression concept altogether” (1950, p.461).

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<sup>5</sup> Though its use was rare until the mid-nineteenth century, ‘conceptual’ first entered English in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. It appears to have entered the English via the adaptation of the medieval Latin *conceptual-is* (relating to a conceiving in the mental sense) which had in turn developed from the earlier Latin *conceptus* (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p.655).

<sup>6</sup> The date in parenthesis is the earliest date of use identified by the *O.E.D.*, All the information on this development is from Vol.III, p.655.

<sup>7</sup> Parallels we might note include the founding of the first twenty-four research labs in psychology in the United States between 1883 and 1893, and the establishment of the American Psychological Association in 1892 (Weiten, 1992, p.5).

### **Dictionary Definitions: Contemporary Examples of the Classical Model**

The main goal of this brief section is to survey some definitions from recent important dictionaries in order to show the continuing contemporary impact of many of the features of the classical model that were explored in the above etymology. I am concerned with definitions of the predominant sense of ‘concept,’ and of words related to this sense, and not with side developments such as the appearance of a particular use of “concept” in contemporary advertising (*O.E.D.*, 1989, Vol.III, p.653). While it is not the case that all contemporary use presupposes the classical model, I would suggest that these dictionary definitions reflect the widespread impact and continuing importance of this model in much of that use.

The prior etymological discussion points to the notion that concepts are the cognitive products of a generalizing mental operation (conception) that abstracts the general notion or idea of a class of objects. Along these lines we find that *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* defines a ‘concept’ as “the resultant of a generalizing mental operation” (1993, p.469). A similar strand forms the central emphasis of the *O.E.D.*’s definition that identifies two components of the main sense of ‘concept’: first, “the product of the faculty of conception”; and second, “an idea of a class of objects, a general notion or idea” (1989, vol.III, p. 653). There is also dictionary evidence for the continuing importance of the connection between sensory perception and conception drawn out above. In *Webster’s* we are told that ‘concept’ refers to “a generic mental image abstracted from percepts” (1993, p.469) and that ‘conception’ is “the abstract, intellectual, or universal element in cognition as distinguished from the apprehension of concrete particulars in sense perception” (*Webster’s*, 1993, p.470).

However, while these dictionaries are overwhelmingly suggestive of the classical model of concepts, there is one noteworthy exception. *Webster’s Dictionary* presents one sub-sense of

concept as “an idea that includes all that is characteristically associated with a term” (1993, p.469). The focus here is on concepts in relation to language as appeared to be the case with the uses of ‘concept’ that concerned William James. Since the associations of a term can be multi-faceted and even internally inconsistent this definition also points to concepts that may fail to fulfill the criteria of classical categorization. Hence, this definition points us towards the existence of a strand within the use of ‘concept’ that does not make the focus on atomized units of cognition that satisfy the criteria of classical categories that is characteristic of the classical model. We will later see that just such language-focused accounts of multi-faceted concepts have played a major role in some academic literature. Unfortunately the predominance of the classical model is such that the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers no sense or sub-sense for ‘concept’ corresponding to such language-focused uses. Hence it provides no etymological information that would enable us to explore the origins of what will turn out to be a crucial contemporary sense of ‘concept.’

## **PART TWO: *Limitations and Problems of the Classical Model***

### **Cognitive Psychology, Cognitive Science, and the Classical Model**

While I will later explore alternatives to the classical model of concepts that focus on language, there are also alternatives that retain a focus on individual cognition but reject the necessary and sufficient feature-based model that originates in the classical view of categories. Much of the cognitive psychological and cognitive science literature shares with the classical model the tendency to focus on concepts as postulated elements of the actual mental processes of individuals. We are told that concepts are “the basic ‘alphabet’ of cognition” (Lamberts & Shanks, 1997, p.5) and that they are “mental representations of a certain kind” (Murphy &

Medin, 1985, p.290). However, a major trend in the recent study of cognition is the rejection of the necessary and sufficient common features account of concepts, and along with this a shift away from an atomized view of cognition towards an emphasis on the complexity, and flexibility of cognitive structures.

Rosch's research in the 1970's on human categorization sparked a wave of interest in research on concepts that continues to this day (overviews of this literature are provided by Lakoff, 1987; Komatsu, 1992; and several authors in the recent anthology edited by Lamberts and Shanks 1997). A basic problem spurring this literature was the discovery of "prototype" effects in human categorization behavior and the recognition that these could not be accounted for by a model based solely on necessary and sufficient lists of common features as determining category membership. The "exemplar" theory of concepts suggested that behavior might be explained if people categorized on the basis of similarity to known examples or to idealized examples abstracted from known examples (Murphy and Medin, 1985; Komatsu, 1992). However a further problem was the recognition that even if categorization behavior could be explained by necessary and sufficient conditions, or by exemplars, this would not explain *why* those conditions or exemplars were chosen as defining. Several "explanation-based" theories of concepts that attempt to provide an account of concepts that can answer this question by further expanding the content of "concepts" have been surveyed by Komatsu (1992). A clear example of the trend of expanding what is considered part of the mental entities called 'concepts' is provided by the work of Paul Thagard for whom 'concepts' must be understood in terms of "conceptual structures." These complex mental webs can include information about synonyms, antonyms, kind relationships, part-whole relationships, rules expressing casual relations, and particular instances (Thagard, 1990, 1992).

However, such a shift of focus towards more complex structures that interweave theories and background knowledge can lead to confusion over what exactly a “concept” is intended to be. The notion of a concept as a distinct unit of thought becomes increasingly untenable since it becomes difficult to say just where one concept ends and another begins as what were previously seen as distinct concepts become linked via shared elements of the same conceptual web. The empirical research on cognition has tended to break apart the two characteristic components of the classical model of concepts. The focus on cognition has been kept, but the various expectations derived from the classical view of categories have been rejected. Hence, “concepts” are cognitive, but they do not have clear boundaries, and they cannot be described by combinations of necessary and sufficient binary features.

The work of Barsalou (1989, 1991) offers an alternative use of ‘concept’ within the cognitive psychology tradition of focusing on individual cognition. Instead of moving from concepts as stable atoms of cognition to concepts as complex structures, Barsalou moves in the opposite direction and treats concepts as fleeting elements of working memory. Barsalou emphasizes that individual acts of categorization are flexible and goal-adaptable actions that take place against the backdrop of complex structures of loosely organized information located in long-term memory. It is long-term memory that includes all of the information about abstracted properties, exemplars and parts of exemplars and intuitive theories discussed in the variety of theories surveyed by Komatsu (1992). Barsalou explicitly restricts his use of the word ‘concept’ to refer “*only* to temporarily constructed representations in working memory; *concept* will *never* refer to information in long-term memory” (1989, p.93).

The sharp distinction between Barsalou and other cognitive psychologists regarding which parts of cognition to call “concepts” reflects a lack of consensus in the face of the



breakdown of the classical categories component of the classical model's focus on cognition. Elements of this situation have been recognized and discussed in a recent article by Smith and Samuelson (1997). They point out the growing disconnect between the initial classical tradition derived expectations of what concepts would be like, and the findings of actual research on cognition. Smith and Samuelson suggest two possible responses to this situation. The first would be to avoid the use of the word 'concept' altogether since nothing in cognition appears to fit most of the presuppositions associated with 'concept' in what I have called the classical model. The other approach is to significantly alter the meaning of 'concept' as Barsalou does (1997, p.190).

The research discussed in this section provides a clear example of the influence of goals on the use of the word 'concept.' For scholars concerned with the empirical study of cognition the goal is to provide an account of mental functioning that actually fits observed behavior. The word 'concept' in such an analysis is strongly secondary to the results of research. It may be avoided altogether, or else redefined in any of a number of different ways in order to fit what is discovered. The result of this research has been a fascinating account of cognition paired with a diverse and uncoordinated use of the word 'concept' as different scholars adapt the word in different ways or even drop its use entirely in favor of new technical terminology. However, amongst the diversity in use of the word 'concept' and accompanying theories of 'concepts,' there is a widely shared consensus on the flaws of the classical category-based aspects of the classical model of concepts. Simply put there is no predominant role in the general account of individual human cognition for the stable atomized abstractions of necessary and sufficient common features that the classical model would have us call "concepts."

### **The Diverse Use of ‘Concept’ and the Cognitive-Linguistic Dilemma**

While many uses of the word ‘concept’ center on notions such as “mental representations” or “mental images” that suggest the impact of the cognitive focus of the classical model, the overall spectrum of the use of ‘concept’ outstretches the range of this focus. It is the concern of this section to explore the uses of the word ‘concept’ that we make in both ordinary and academic life that simply are not addressed by the classical model. Considering the contrast of the classical model with the multi-faceted use of the word ‘concept’ enables us to recognize the limited nature of the classical model’s focus on concepts as elements of individual cognition.

It is useful to first to lay out a basic distinction against which different uses react in different ways. In talking about concepts we can be concerned with linguistic or cognitive phenomena. However, the description of the use of a word is different from a description of a postulated cognitive structure. Arguing that these are tightly intertwined as cognitive linguistics and others have done is not the same as blurring this important distinction. A related point here is that a cognitive structure is a property of an individual while a linguistic structure is a property of a language that is shared by many individuals. These distinctions are key to the use of the word ‘concept’ precisely because our use forms a broad spectrum. This spectrum ranges from the atomized mental representations of individual cognition postulated by the classical model to the discussion of complex structures of language-based meaning that are both shared and contested by groups of individuals. We can identify underlying this wide spectrum a general trend in the use of the word ‘concept.’ As the size of the group to which a concept is attributed

increases it becomes easier to understand that attribution as a claim about the structure of language use rather than as a description of an actual cognitive structure.

The attribution of a ‘concept’ to particular individuals can without much difficulty be construed as a claim about the nature of their cognitive structures.<sup>8</sup> However, ‘concept’ is also frequently used to attribute “a general notion or idea” not to an individual, but to a group whether small and distinct, or large and stretched across time. We can easily discuss the “*Sierra Club’s* concept” or “*our* concept” or the “*Ancient Greek* concept of the polis,” in addition to “*Marx’s* concept” or “*my* concept.”<sup>9</sup> These attributions of concepts to groups form a central part of our use of ‘concept,’ yet they are potentially rife with ambiguity.

A phrase such as “our concept” that attributes a concept to a group of individuals might appear to make sense in either of two divergent ways. It might be possible in limited circumstances to treat a group concept as a claim about the cognitive structures possessed by each individual member of that group. Such a claim seems most feasible for concepts that do seem to fit some of the properties of classical categories such as a triangle. Here the attribution of the concept to a group entails *similarities* between individual’s cognitive structures.

However, such a cognitive view of concepts cannot deal with the attribution of a concept to a group of individuals who understand that concept in diverse and conflicting ways. An

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<sup>8</sup> However, we should note that *all* conceptual descriptions, especially in the social sciences, rest predominately on the examination of examples of language-use. Even for individuals, there is a leap made when we suppose that analyzing their use of a particular word enables us to describe their actual cognitive structures. A proponent of language-focused discussions of concepts could urge that intellectual modesty dictates that such a leap be avoided by treating all descriptions of concepts as being descriptions of language use regardless of whether a single individual or a large group of conflicting individuals are under discussion.

<sup>9</sup> We may also note that the use of “*the* concept” may usually be taken as implicitly referring to the concept of a particular group or individual. Hence the phrase “the concept of polyarchy” could easily be replaced with “political science’s concept of polyarchy” or perhaps even with “Dahl’s concept of polyarchy” without significantly altering its meaning. However uses of the generalizing phrase *the* concept are always potentially open to the complaint that exactly whose (individual or group of some sort) concept is being discussed (and whose is not) is ambiguous or even completely unspecified. Certainly there are examples of philosophical works where such uses are meant to refer to a concept that is independent of any context whatsoever. However, I do not address these uses since they not widely

approach to such uses is to understand them as claims about the patterns of use that emerge across an aggregation of differing individuals. Such patterns cannot be treated as descriptions of the cognitive structure of any particular individual. However, they can be treated as claims about patterns of language use since language is understood as a structure that is emergent on a group level. Here then the attribution of a concept to a group is a statement about the patterns of that group's language use. Indeed in such a case one might try to discuss the structure of a "concept" by pointing to *differences* between individuals in their cognitive structures.

The extended cognitive-linguistic range of the use of 'concept' relative to the classical model does not in itself constitute a contradiction of that model's cognitive focus. A strong pro-classical response might argue that large swathes of the use of 'concept' are effectively meaningless because they make no tangible prediction about the mental content of any particular individual in the group to which a concept is attributed. However, such a response presupposes the idea that when we use the word 'concept' we ought to be talking about individual mental content which is exactly what elements of ordinary and academic use challenge. A less radical response would be to argue that while there are diverse uses of 'concept' that are each meaningful individually, the problem is that the use of the same word in all these individual uses blurs the lines between distinct phenomena that need to be distinguished.

However, regardless of whether we approve of it or not, we cannot escape the fact that in ordinary use 'concept' is a multi-faceted and powerfully flexible word. The wide range of ordinary use presents a fundamental tension that any attempt to offer a coherent framework for specialized use of 'concept' must wrestle with. The classical model's focus on individual cognition leaves it inarticulate in the face of structures of meaning that are shared and contested

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applied in ordinary use and they are entirely absent from the subset of academic uses which I seek to understand in this paper.

across a group. However, a later example will point out that alternatives that focus on such structures may in turn be puzzled by the notion that a concept could be an idiosyncratic mental object in the mind of an individual. Adopting any framework for the consistent use of the word ‘concept,’ or offering any singular and cohesive account of what a concept is, is likely to entail a limitation of the use of ‘concept’ relative to its range in ordinary use.

### **PART THREE: *Two Frameworks for Talking about Concepts***

The classical model of concepts and the cognitive-linguistic range of the potential use of ‘concept’ provide tools for distinguishing key features of two frameworks for the use of the word ‘concept’ that play an important role in political science discussions of concepts. In identifying the *scientific-ideal* and the *language-focused* frameworks my primary concern is with outlining the alternatives they present to scholars who are wrestling with concepts. While my discussion identifies different scholars with each framework it should be emphasized that existing discussions of concepts may draw upon both of the frameworks which I seek to distinguish here.

#### **The Scientific-Ideal Framework and the “Disambiguation” of Meaning**

The cognition research surveyed above suggests that in general humans do not think in terms of the kind of ‘concepts’ identified by the classical model. However, such a general conclusion does not rule out the claim that there might exist a particular subset of individuals engaged in particular activities who do think in a manner akin to that suggested by elements of the classical model. Hence, it might even be argued that the success of science can be understood precisely because, in contrast to ordinary human thought and language, it fits important elements of the classical model, especially the classical view of categories. Such an

argument enables us to acknowledge the insights of recent research into cognition while also sympathetically examining the exhortations of scholars whose interest in concepts is driven by their concern with making social science more “scientific.” Scholars who utilize the scientific-ideal framework for talking about concepts effectively treat the classical model, which was originally meant as a “description” of human thought in general, as a methodological ideal.

Key to the scientific-ideal framework is the claim that the thinking and language-use of scientists is distinctly different from ordinary use. The existence of such a distinction is a central argument made by the Karl Popper who asserts that a distinctive feature of science is that its statements are “intersubjectively testable” (1991, p.105). For Popper the success of science, and its distinction from “pseudo-science,” rests on the ability of scientists to test and criticize each others’ claims, and this in turn rests on the clarity of the empirical implications of any statement.

The scientific-ideal framework predominates in the essays of political scientists Giovanni Sartori, Fred Riggs, and Henry Teune that are collected together in the *Tower of Babel* (1975). In the introduction to their collection, Sartori, Riggs, and Teune express their concern that the social sciences do not live up to the standards of science because their “words continue to refer to vague conceptions rather than to clearly demarcated concepts” (1975, p.1). Social scientists must alter their existing habits of thought and language-use to fit a pattern that the natural sciences are postulated to follow “if their work is to become truly scientific and cumulative” (Riggs, 1975, p.39). The Popperian notion of intersubjectivity is invoked by Teune who argues that “defined concepts are, as a matter of principle, supposed to be intersubjective, that is, capable of communicating content or reference unambiguously” (1975, p.80).

Sartori seeks in his essay to develop a series of systematic oppositions in language-use with which to distinguish between a “common” and a “scientific” version of the relationship

between words, concepts, and cases. For Sartori, “common discourse” involves ambiguously related “meanings,” “words,” and “phenomena-or-facts,” while in contrast “scientific discourse” involves clearly related “concepts,” “terms,” and “data” (1975, p.12). Sartori’s particular use of “concept” is further refined by a contrast with ‘conception.’ A conception “is a set of ideas associated with, or elicited by a given word,” whereas “a concept is a conception treated according to logical rules” (1975, p.12).

For Sartori, and his fellow authors, conceptual analysis is a crucial methodological task facing the social scientist. This analysis involves sorting out the many meanings associated with a word that constitute a “conception,” and developing from these classical “concepts” that can form the basis for the intersubjectivity that is the cornerstone of science. Scholars whose use of ‘concept’ suggests the scientific-ideal framework extol the need for the “disambiguation” of existing concepts and the creation of new concepts that can “solve” the problem of the lack of clear communication of ideas amongst social scientists.

The scientific-ideal framework uses the word ‘concept’ in the context of a central concern with the clarity and communicability of mental content. It sets up as an ideal a situation in which a group of users of a concept all share the same understanding. This ideal parallels the notion of shared similarities in cognitive structure that provides one way of interpreting the attribution of a concept to a group. Effectively we might say that the scientific-ideal framework takes the example of a concept such as triangle as an ideal for what concepts should be in social science. The scientific-ideal concern with the methodological prescription of means by which social scientists can clearly communicate their ideas and claims would be left unsatisfied by a treatment of “concepts” that simply strives to describe patterns of language use emergent at a group level. The classical model of concepts as atomized cognitive entities fits comfortably with

this concern. Such a cognitive focus is clear in Riggs' characterization of concepts as "mental images" (1975, p.47) and Sartori's description of a concept as the "unit of thinking" (1975, p.13).

The predominance of the classical model of concepts in the scientific-ideal framework is emphasized by the distinction it seeks to draw between the meaning of a concept and the meaning of a word. In the introduction to the *Tower of Babel* it is argued that "any single word normally refers to several concepts – often also to several fuzzy conceptions" (1975, p.2). The classical model of concepts plays a central role in this distinction. The classical criteria of clear boundaries and defining features are taken as fitting most concepts while most words display an "overlapping and unnecessarily erratic multiplicity of meanings" (Sartori, 1975, p.15). The word/concept distinction allows Riggs' to argue that an analysis of the contemporary academic use of the word 'party' reveals at least three distinct concepts at work (1975, p.62). While these three different concepts of party all actually share overlapping features, the rigid criteria of classical categories presupposed in Riggs' scientific-ideal view of concepts dictates that they be labeled as three distinct concepts. The same criteria underlies Riggs' use of 'concept' when he tells us that adding an additional characteristic to an existing set of characteristics "generates a new concept" (1975, p.37). In general we can note that, if applied rigidly, the classical logic of the scientific-ideal framework suggests that any two scholars whose application of words employ slightly different sets of characteristics must be seen as employing different "concepts."

The scientific-ideal framework predominant in *Tower of Babel* (1975) is also a prominent feature in Sartori's "Guidelines for Concept Analysis" (1984). The treatment of the features of classical categories as an ideal for what concepts should be is clear in Sartori's identification of a series of "defects" commonly found in existing social scientific use. The guidelines presented are a series of rules for "curing concepts" that pursue a classical ideal of concepts whose



“defining properties” clearly delimit a set of “referents” (1984). A key task in the analysis of concepts is hence to distinguish “accompanying” properties from those “defining” properties which “identify the referent and establish its boundaries” (1984, p.33). Being able to draw such boundaries and hence distinguish amongst referents is crucial to what it means to have a concept. Sartori states in his glossary definitions that a concept is “the basic unit of thinking” and that “it can be said that we have a concept of A (or of A-ness) when we are able to distinguish A from whatever is not-A” (1984, p.74).

Sartori’s “Guidelines” however also moves beyond his 1975 essay in a number of ways. Far greater attention is paid to the importance of concept “reconstruction” (1984, see especially p.40-50). In this process a variety of uses are surveyed to collect an array of the various characteristics associated with a concept by different individuals in a given literature. An attempt is then made to organize this array in a manner that “compounds the similarities and the differences in how a concept is conceived” (1984, p.41). The result of such a reconstruction is an aggregation across individuals whose individual uses differ and contest rather than a description of a “basic unit of thinking” that satisfies the criteria of classical categories.

Despite the fact that his glossary stipulations and much of his use presupposes the scientific-ideal for using ‘concept’, Sartori recognizes that there are difficulties inherent in attempting to impose this framework’s limits on the use of ‘concept.’ He asks whether we should say that “*a concept has many meanings*, or instead that *each one of these meanings is a concept?*” (1984, p.56, italics in original). The influence of the scientific-ideal’s classical vision of concepts as distinct cognitive entities is clear in Sartori’s suggestion that the second choice is “more accurate.” However, Sartori also recognizes that this way of using ‘concept’ encourages fragmentation of meaning. Hence, he suggests that in the interests of “counteracting chaos” it

may be preferable to say that there is one concept that has many “conceptualizations” (1984, p.56). Under this option what ‘concept’ describes is not the structure of individuals’ units of thought, but rather the patterns emergent in a certain collection of language use. Within Sartori’s work this option represents a side trend that contrasts with his overall tendency towards the scientific-ideal framework and suggests the difficulties facing scholars who seek to stipulate themselves away from the full cognitive-linguistic range of ordinary use. However, other scholars have developed this option into a full-fledged alternative framework for the use of ‘concept’ -- the language-focused framework.

### **The Language-Focused Framework and the Structure of Meaning**

The classical model as a whole, or key elements of it, have received heavy criticism in philosophical discussions (Geach 1957; Gillett, 1992; Putnam 1981; Wittgenstein 1958b). In sharp contrast to the classical model and the scientific-ideal adaptation of it, these philosophers’ treatment of ‘concepts’ gives language a central role. This linguistic focus is key to their ability to treat concepts as multi-faceted social phenomena that have existence independent of any particular individual. In this treatment they parallel the linguistic approach to the attribution of concepts to groups that was earlier presented as an alternative to the shared cognitive structures approach that is taken by the proponents of concepts as a scientific ideal. Within political science, and political theory in particular, several scholars have sought to investigate ‘concepts’ as “linguistic and cultural artifacts” (Freeden, 1994, p. 146) whose features are to be ascertained through the study and understanding of linguistic use (Pitkin 1967, 1973; Freedon, 1994, 1996). Rather than prescribing the creation of scientific “concepts” that will “solve” disagreement, the central concern of scholars such as Pitkin and Freedon is to understand how the individual

differences that do exist regarding a “concept” may be understood in terms of patterns that may emerge in the aggregate.

In offering an alternative to the classical model for understanding and talking about concepts many scholars have drawn upon insights offered by the later Wittgenstein’s investigation of the nature of language, and in particular his concern with the relationship between linguistic training, abilities and rule-following. The use of ‘concept’ by scholars in this tradition builds upon the basic idea that concepts are capacities that are prominently displayed in the use of language (Geach 1957, p.13; Putnam 1981, p.19; Weitz 1977, p.14; Gillett 1992, p.3,4.28). In stressing that having concepts entails having abilities that can be demonstrated in linguistic acts these scholars provide us with an example of a perspective on concepts that focuses on the concept-language relation. This is in sharp contrast to the focus on distinguishing classes of objects that dominates in classical model assertions such as Sartori’s glossary stipulation that fully grasping a concept entails the ability to distinguish “A from not-A.”

Grant Gillett’s work provides a recent philosophical example of an attempt to integrate the view of concepts as abilities with an understanding of language as a system of social rules. He emphasizes that what counts as an ability is determined by rules: “a subject has a concept when a determinate or rule-governed way of responding to items in the world is apt to describe that subject’s activity” (1992, p.17). It is because these rules are public phenomena that “concepts cannot be understood solely in terms of the ‘structures’ and ‘operations’ within the mind, but rather involve public rules which a child learns to follow” (1992, p.88). In looking at concepts we have to look beyond the individual because “a conceptual ability has a shape determined by something essentially independent of the individual mind” (1992, p.31).

It should be stressed that the language-focused approach does not discover what concepts actually *are*, but instead lays out an alternative framework for the *use* of the word ‘concept.’ In contrast to the classical model’s focus on ‘perception,’ ‘abstraction,’ and ‘products of a mental faculty,’ this alternative framework discusses ‘concepts’ in terms of ‘rules,’ ‘norms,’ and ‘abilities.’ Hence, Gillett’s statement that “the present view yields a clear sense in which a concept is independent of the mind of any particular thinker” (1992, p.16) should not be understood as a statement reporting an empirical discovery about concepts, but rather as a statement about his own preferred use of ‘concept.’

The view of concepts as inherently intersubjective and rule-governed offers insight into many of the ways we talk about concepts that spurred our earlier concern with the attribution of concepts to groups. For the language-focused approach to concepts the requirement for meaningful attribution of a concept to a group is dramatically different from that put forward in the previous discussion of concepts as a scientific ideal. Instead of striving for standardization across individuals this framework searches for rules and regularities governing the use of the associated word among the referenced group. When such patterns do emerge the aggregation of group use can be considered to constitute a structure of sorts, and hence the attribution of a “concept” to the group is meaningful. Indeed, while the classical model cast doubt on the meaningfulness of the phrase “our concept” because of its focus on cognition, a language focused framework firmly applied challenges uses of “concept” in the context of a purely idiosyncratic mental content not shaped by public rules. Along these lines Wittgenstein (1958b) famously disputed the possibility of a purely private language, and Gillett (1992, p.99-100) struggles with the question of whether an individual raised alone on a desert island could be said to have any concepts.

The framework so far presented can take varying forms that allow for different degrees of flexibility between individual uses depending on what the “rules” governing use are taken to entail. This issue is important because of the central concern with understanding conceptual conflict that is displayed in the continued interest in Gallie’s notion of an “essentially contested concept” among scholars (Gallie 1956; MacIntyre 1973; Mason 1990; Grafstein 1988; Freedman 1994; Connolly 1974; Weitz 1977). Hanna Pitkin, in her *Wittgenstein and Justice*, offers an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s understanding of rules that is highly congenial to seeing discussions of “contested concepts” as siblings, or at least close cousins, of the framework for discussing concepts put forward by Gillett. Pitkin suggests that for many concepts, and especially the ones that concern us in political science, we should not expect that there will be a “single, unifying, consistent rule that fits all cases” (1973, p.93). She insists both that there are “rules of a sort to be found” in such cases and that “the rules that can be abstracted from our ordinary use of an expression, from the cases in which that expression occurs, are in fact often mutually contradictory” (1973, p.90). Hence, an account of the rules governing the use of a concept can be an account that embraces contesting alternatives within a single framework.

A model for how to think about and investigate the relationship between a concept and different competing accounts of it is presented in another of Pitkin’s works, *The Concept of Representation* (1967). Pitkin begins this work by offering a metaphor that suggests how representation can be understood as a singular concept that different political theorists have offered competing accounts of:

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 from different angles. But each proceeds to treat his 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 in the dark, which all of them are photographing;

and the different photographs together can be used to reconstruct it in complete detail (1967, p.11).

There is of course a crucial tension within this kind of framework for talking about concepts regarding the relationship between flexibility and structure. The more flexibility and internal contradiction among particular uses increases, the more it can appear that there actually is no singular structure to be pictured as existing at the aggregate level, and hence no single concept. In response to this tension scholars concerned with exploring complex and contested structures of meanings have attempted to articulate criteria for locating boundaries to the set of phenomena that can appropriately be discussed as singular concepts. These criteria offer a means of distinguishing concepts as a distinctive phenomenon that is far less restrictive than the scientific-ideal's tendency to equate concepts with a single set of defining characteristics.

Gallie in his discussion of essentially contested concepts directly addresses the question of whether he is really justified in using the word 'concept.' In particular he seeks to find grounds for defending his claim that his proposed essentially contested concepts describe situations in which there "a *single* meaning" that is contested rather than situations in which people simply "confuse two *different* concepts" (1956, p.175, italics in original). He develops the idea that various disputants could agree on the status of a shared "exemplar" as a means of suggesting that there is some degree of shared structure (1956, p.176). Dispute arises because contesting individuals draw different implications from the same exemplar. It should be noted that Gallie does not restrict the notion of an exemplar to situations where there is a single case that all discussants agree is an example of the concept. For example, he suggests that the exemplar for democracy is a "long tradition ... of demands, aspirations, revolts and reforms of a

common *anti-inegalitarian* character” that are interpreted in a variety of ways by contesting accounts of democracy (1956, p.186).

The issue of how to distinguish whether one is dealing with one multi-faceted concept, or several distinct concepts, has also been explicitly addressed in the recent work of Michael Freedman on the “morphology” of political concepts. In addressing the “multi-faceted” (1994, p.144) structure of political concepts, Freedman develops a distinction between “ineliminable” components of concepts and “quasi-contingent” ones (1994, p.146). The notion of an ineliminable component is a key for Freedman to the question of whether a topic of discussion is one complex concept or several concepts. He explicitly equates the absence of such a component with the need to “concede that the word used to represent the concept in question refers to more than one concept” (1994, p.147).

There are several key features of Freedman’s ineliminable components that bring out the important differences between the kind of framework he proposes and the scientific-ideal understanding of concepts. A “defining property” for the scientific ideal framework involves the classical model’s representational relationship between a concept and a defining set of physical properties of empirical cases. It is a statement about what will be true of every phenomenon to which the concept applies. In sharp contrast, Freedman’s ineliminable components focus on the relationship between a concept and language, it is a property of every use of a word. Freedman tells us that when he calls a component ineliminable he means that “all known uses of the concept employ it, so that its absence would deprive the concept of intelligibility” (1994, p.146). A second key distinction lies in how Freedman views the relationship between ineliminable and quasi-contingent components. For the scientific ideal framework it is the “defining” properties that are fundamental to a concept. In contrast, Freedman stresses that political concepts cannot be

understood solely in terms of their ineliminable components. Instead, much of what makes a concept rich and interesting lies in the various combinations of quasi-contingent components that can be combined with the ineliminable components (1994, p.149).

Similar points can be made about Hanna Pitkin's study of the concept of representation. The language-focused nature of her conceptual analysis is clear when she states that she seeks to explore the meaning of representation "by making explicit the knowledge we already have about how the word is used" (1967, p.11). Furthermore, while she identifies a single "basic meaning" shared across the variety of discussions of representation, Pitkin stresses that the central concern of her analysis is with understanding how various perspectives apply and add to this "basic meaning" to produce a diversity of complex uses (1967, p.10-11). For both Pitkin and Freedman it is the flexible and changeable aspects of concepts that interest them precisely because they seek to understand the complex nature of the existing discussions of the concept. In contrast, for scholars using the scientific-ideal framework it is the defining properties that are of central concern precisely because their goal is the disambiguation of meaning so that concepts that meet their methodological ideal can be developed in political science.

A suggestive example of how such differences of interest can lead to differences in the use of key words is suggested by contrasting the use of 'concept' and 'conception' made by Sartori (1975, p.12; 1984, p.74) with that made by several scholars within the literature that uses 'concept' in regard to multi-faceted flexible structures. Sartori is centrally concerned with the development of clearly delimited "units of thinking" that enable clear distinctions to be made among classes of phenomena. It is these "units" that he primarily associates with the use of the word 'concept' and he sees these as being developed from conceptions. In his 1984 glossary he defines a conception as follows: "a concept, (1) in the early process of being conceived, or (2) all



the compatible meanings associated with a word. A conception is thus a loose or unstructured concept” (1984, p.74).

However, scholars whose central interest is with the complex of meanings that Sartori calls a “conception” tend to refer to the object of their analysis as a “concept” and distinguish a different use for “conception” from that of Sartori. An example of the kind of distinction between conceptions and concepts made in explorations of the structure of meaning is provided in the work of Abraham Kaplan. He states that different individuals can have different conceptions because “a conception ‘belongs to’ a particular person” (1964, p.48). In turning to concepts Kaplan uses Wittgenstein’s notion of a family resemblance to suggest how the many different conceptions associated with a term together form a “family of conceptions.” For Kaplan the word ‘concept’ refers to this family. A concept is an “abstract construction” associated with the overall use of a term rather than any singular use (1964, p.49). Kaplan is using ‘concept’ in manner that overlaps with elements of Sartori’s definition of ‘conception.’ Even though a distinction is not stipulated directly, several scholars discussing contested concepts in political science have utilized a similar ‘concept’/’conception’ distinction. Along these lines Andrew Mason has addressed the relationship between different “conceptions” of an “essentially contested concept” (1990), as has Robert Grafstein (1988).

In his *Taking Rights Seriously* (1978), Ronald Dworkin offers a distinct, but related, use of ‘concept’/’conception.’ Dworkin urges that we need to distinguish the “*concept* of fairness” from “any specific *conception* of fairness” (1978, p.134, italics in original). As with the preceding examples, the idea here is that a concept is flexible and open to different particular conceptions. Such a distinction is key to Dworkin’s discussion of legal interpretations of the Equal Protection Clause of the constitution. Dworkin argues that the clause “makes the concept

of equality a test of legislation, but it does not stipulate any particular conception of that concept” (1978, p.226). My point here is not to obscure the fact that there are differences between Dworkin’s application of ‘concept’/’conception’ to the specific arena of legal interpretation and the preceding examples. Rather it is to point out that despite these differences both provide telling examples of a reversal of Sartori’s use of ‘concept’/’conception.’

These different distinctions provide different ways of talking about particular samples of conceptual work. For examples, scholars from the tradition of language focused analysis of the structure of meaning might say that this paper has identified different conceptions of the concept of a concept. However, a strictly applied scientific-ideal framework might conclude that I have demonstrated that there is in fact no singular concept of a concept, only a multi-faceted conception of it that should be reconstructed into two or more distinct concepts. My concern here is not to take sides in such a dispute and declare that one such use is correct. Rather it to show that such clearly disparate uses do exist, and to suggest that these differences reflect basic, important, and interesting differences between scholar’s in their perspectives about what concepts are, and why they should concern us.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper is motivated by the tension between a firmly held belief that concepts are important, and a deeply felt confusion over just what they are. A primary goal has been to suggest that there are clear benefits to putting aside the desire for a singular answer to the question “what is a concept?” and instead engaging in the careful exploration of how our varying answers to this question presuppose differing uses of the word ‘concept.’ In addition, I have sought to suggest that any attempt to standardize a consistent and univocal use of the word

'concept' will be limited relative to cognitive-linguistic range of ordinary use. Scholars who strive after such univocality should explicitly recognize what uses they are embracing, and which they must forgo if they are to realize their goal.

As part of our concern with concepts we need to strive for self-conscious awareness of the alternatives available to us in our own work. Recognizing the different implications of different approaches to the word 'concept' allows us to consider explicitly what it is that we seek to do (and what we are not seeking to do) when we engage in a particular "concept"-focused discussion.

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