

The Concept of Power: A Meta-theoretical Approach

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Conceptual analysis has always constituted a cardinal part of the social and political study of societies. The investigation of concepts has been carried out in order to explain social reality making reference to the meaning of the words used in ordinary language. Nonetheless, the definition of political concepts has always represented an arduous task. Probably the greatest difficulty in conceptual analysis is caused by the uncertainty of the boundaries of the analytical divide between *facts* and *values*. The agreement upon this dichotomy gave birth to a widely accepted distinction between two types of definition: descriptive definitions, which refer to what *is*, and normative definitions, which refer to what *ought to be*¹.

The distinction between descriptive and normative definitions has recently encountered a number of criticisms, which have in some way attempted to show the weaknesses of the divide between facts and values itself. Concepts like democracy, freedom, power and justice have been claimed to include in their meaning both the facets of the dichotomy. To call a certain state of affairs a ‘democracy’ implies two distinct activities: firstly, as Gallie suggests, to define something as a ‘democracy’ is, in the first place, to appraise it². Using the word ‘democracy’, then, we are expressing a value-judgment – generally speaking, a positive one – about a particular state of affairs. Secondly, to call something a ‘democracy’ is to describe it, i.e., to ascribe to it a certain *property* or number of properties that all the things that we call ‘democracy’ have in common³. But again, how can we decide which are the properties which render ‘democratic’ a particular state of affairs? Some authors suggest that the identification of

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¹ DAHL R.A., *Modern Political Analysis*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1963, p. 112.

² GALLIE W.B., “Essentially Contested Concepts”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 56, 1955-6.

³ More specifically, we can describe the concept of democracy making reference to Sartori’s definition of *property of properties*. According to this author, calling something ‘democratic’ means to ascribe to that object all the different features we normally attribute to ‘democracies’. SARTORI G., “The Tower of Babel”, in COLLIER D., GERRING J. (eds.), *Concepts and Method in the Social Science. The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p. 84.

those properties is an activity which transcends the description of reality and falls again in the sphere of values.

This kind of reasoning led some scholars, like William Connolly and Steven Lukes, to include political terms among those that Gallie defined as *essentially contested concepts*, “concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users⁴”. Essential contestability theory, in its original form, has been widely criticized for providing the ground for the annihilation of all political theory in a full conceptual relativism. However, despite the numerous criticisms, no scholar offered a valid solution for the problems brought to light by this theory. Essential contestability theory has, in most cases, been abandoned without being debunked.

In the first part of this paper I will not try to deny the essential contestability theory, but I will try, instead, to provide some reasons to avoid the troubles caused by the conceptual relativism that it generates. The fact that no rational agreement is possible about the definition of social and political concepts does not completely remove the possibility to investigate the terms of the disagreement together with its possible causes. An attentive conceptual analysis will enable us to identify not only what makes those definitions different, but also some similarities which are impossible to grasp at the first sight. In doing so, I shall present a possible interpretation of conceptual analysis which will allow to find some level of agreement in the difficult task of defining concepts. A preliminary step will be the brief exposition of the premises of the essential contestability theory.

The second part of the paper will be devoted to the analysis of the concept of power. Following the lines of reasoning that will be presented in the first part, I shall verify the possibility of identification of a ‘common underlying notion’ of power. After a detailed analysis of the contemporary literature about power, I shall deny the existence of a Rawlsian concept of power common to all its various conceptions. On the contrary, I shall contend that it is possible to identify two distinct ‘underlying notions’ of power, the first labeled ‘power over’, the second ‘power to’. The identification of these two ‘open concepts⁵’ of power will enable me to offer a value-

⁴ GALLIE, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁵ The distinction between *open* and *closed concepts* is proposed by Ian Carter in CARTER I., “Three Kinds of Value-freeness in Political Philosophy”, (unpublished), 2010. A detailed explanation of Carter’s perspective will be offered in the following sections.

free account of what is commonly described as power. Moreover, it will allow to explain the differences and similarities among the various conceptions of power.

1.1 The Theory of The Essential Contestedness of Concepts

The theory of the essential contestedness of social and political concepts was first proposed by W. B. Gallie in 1955⁶. Since that time the theory has undergone a number of different applications and interpretations, together with a wide range of criticisms and appraisals.

The focus of Gallie's analysis is on social and political terms: "The concepts that I propose to examine relate to a number of organized or semi-organized human activities⁷". In the analysis of these kinds of term, according to Gallie: "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 use⁸". This finding leads him to conclude 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 users⁹".

In order to clarify his proposal, Gallie presents a list of seven semi-formal conditions "to which any concept of this kind must conform¹⁰". An essentially contested concept is, then, (I) appraisive, (II) internally complex, (III) variously describable and (IV) open in character. Moreover, (V) essentially contested concepts are recognized as contested by the contending parties and (VI) all derive from "an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users¹¹". Lastly, (VII) the continuous debate about the proper usage of these concepts might allow the achievement of a greater degree of coherence with the original exemplar.

Leaving for elsewhere a detailed discussion of these conditions, I concentrate now on another, no less important issue in Gallie's analysis: the idea of a genuine conceptual dispute.

⁶ GALLIE, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168. Specifically, as David Collier suggests: "Gallie delimits the domain of his concerns, arguing that his discussion is focused on the role of essentially contested concepts in philosophical and scholarly thinking, and not in real-world politics". COLLIER D., HIDALGO F.D., MACIUCEANU A.O., "Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 11, No. 3, p. 215.

⁸ GALLIE, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

1.2 Genuine disputes about concepts

According to Gallie, in political discourse disputes about conceptual usage can occur for various reasons.

“In practical life (...) we are usually wise to regard [a dispute about a concept] as a head-on conflict of interests or tastes or attitudes, which no amount of discussion can possibly dispel (...). On the other hand, when this kind of situation persists in philosophy (...) we are inclined to attribute it to some deep-seated and profoundly interesting intellectual tendency, whose presence is ‘metaphysical’¹²”.

While these are indeed two possible explanations of a number of disputes about concepts, Gallie focuses his attention on disputes of a different kind:

“I shall try to show that there are disputes (...) which are perfectly *genuine*. which, although not resolvable by arguments of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence¹³”.

Essentially contested concepts are, thus, those concepts whose proper use cannot be univocally determined by the tools of *rational argumentation*, and for which it is impossible to “fix a general principle¹⁴” able to solve disputes about their meanings.

In order to be genuine, disputes must not only be based on rational arguments, but must also refer to the *same concept*: “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*¹⁵”. Then, in order to attest the essentially contested nature of social and political terms it is necessary to provide a criterion that allows to distinguish the case in which the dispute occurs about the same concept. According to Gallie, in order to be disputing about the same concept the contending parties should recognize the existence of a common exemplar (condition VI) or prototype:

“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 adaption from an *exemplar*, which might have the form either of one prototype team of players, or of a succession (or tradition)

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹³ *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175, (emphasis as in original).

of teams. [In order for the conceptual dispute to be a genuine one] this exemplar's way of playing must be recognized by all the contending teams to be 'the way the game is to be played'¹⁶.

1.3 The problem of the *exemplar*

It is easy to recognize that one of the most ambiguous parts of Gallie's theory consists in the definition of the *exemplar*. He introduces the idea of the exemplar in order to satisfy one of the requirements necessary for a genuine conceptual dispute, i.e. the fact of the dispute being about the *same* concept. But what is an exemplar, in Gallie's perspective¹⁷? In the detailed analysis he proposed of the terms Art, Christian life and Democracy¹⁸ he offers just a sketch of their declination under condition VI. He does not make a serious effort to specify the 'common exemplar' in the case of Christian life – he just claims that the exemplar "is obvious"¹⁹. In the case of Art, on the other hand, he writes: "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'²⁰". While discussing Democracy he suggests:

"These uses [of the concept of democracy] 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 Revolution²¹".

The concept of exemplar, then, in Gallie's analysis, is much more loose than it appears to be at a first sight. Gallie is not trying to propose that there is one precise historical

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176, (emphasis as in original).

¹⁷ Collier tries to interpret Gallie's reference to the 'exemplar' borrowing from Lukes some examples of what we commonly understand as power: "Lukes mentions several paradigmatic examples of power, including the rule of master over slaves, the political influence of US steel in the 1960s, and the fictional dystopia of Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World. (...) the common core is centered on several, paradigmatic examples that do, in fact, anchor the concept". COLLIER et al., "Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications", p. 220.

¹⁸ The fact that he is not trying to provide an 'exemplar' for the concept of Social Justice – which is the fourth of the terms he analyzes – tell us something about the explanatory power of the same idea of the exemplar: do we really have a prototype, or even an exemplar tradition, of what we normally call justice? And what about different terms, like freedom, or power?

¹⁹ GALLIE, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186, (emphasis as in original).

fact or tradition that allows us to base our interpretation of social concepts on some common elements, but he is only trying to suggest that, in our different understandings of concepts, we all, more or less, share some kind of derivation from one or another tradition. If the exemplar have been intended in a more detailed way, as it seems to emerge from his talking of *an* exemplar, that claim would have been too strong. As Gellner underlines:

“Gallie is, implicitly, betraying his own idea: he talks as if, behind each ‘essentially contested concept’, there was, hidden away in some Platonic heaven, a non-contested, unambiguously defined and fully determinate concept or exemplar. (...) when the clouds of unknowing disperse, and you are allowed to gaze directly at the Exemplar, will *that* Exemplar be *uncontestable*, and terminate all further discussion?²²”.

In proposing this looser position, however, Gallie fails to offer a condition that is sufficiently strong to allow us to claim that we are all debating about the same concept. Are “historically independent but sufficiently similar traditions²³” a sufficient and necessary requirement for us to talk about the same concept? Gellner, again, offers some good reasons to disagree with Gallie’s weaker interpretation of the exemplar:

“My objection here is an application of the ‘genetic fallacy’ argument: the present functioning of a concept (...) is logically independent of its history. Hence a recognition of an ‘essentially contested concept’ must be possible on the basis of the present working on the concept, irrespective of its real history²⁴”.

Other attempts have been made in order to identify a genuine disagreement about political terms. Christine Swanton suggests that the *referent*, not the meaning of the concept, should provide ground for a ‘genuine’ dispute:

“if disputants about the nature of justice or freedom are to be engaged in a genuine contest, they must be arguing about the same ideal. (...) the fact that terms lack a common meaning does not entail that they lack a common referent. For example, a

²² GELLNER E., “The Concept of a Story”, in GELLNER E., *Contemporary Thought and Politics*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London, 1974, p. 99, (emphasis as in original).

²³ GALLIE, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

²⁴ GELLNER, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

theory of reference could be proposed in which rival theories are deemed to refer to the same thing by virtue of their agreement on sufficiently many ‘samples’²⁵.

But then, how many samples are sufficient to claim that our disputes about the term power, for example, are disputes about the same concept? And what happens, then, if we do not share a sufficient number of samples? Would we find each other in a dispute about ambiguous terms, instead of in a genuine dispute about concepts? As a matter of fact, a great part of conceptual disputes takes place exactly about the *extension* of the concept: the disagreement about different interpretations of the concept of power, for example, lies precisely on the inclusion of different empirical referents in the extension of the concept.

1.4 Refining conceptual analysis

According to my analysis, essential contestability theory does not provide any valid criteria for the identification of a ‘genuine’ dispute about concepts. Nor it does it a theory of reference like the one proposed by Swanton, specifically because conceptual disputes often concern the inclusion of one or more referents in the extension of the concept, i.e., in the conditions of application of the concept itself.

In the attempt to better clarify this weakness of essential contestability theory, it is useful to introduce and explain some of the terms involved in conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis consists in the investigation of the relations among *words*, *concepts* and the *world*. Words are not the same as concepts: the same word can be used to indicate different things, it can be polysemic. Concepts, on the contrary, are considered to be composed of a number of sufficient and necessary conditions which discriminate between what the concept is and what the concept is not. The relation which exists between words and concepts is the *meaning*, and since a word can have two or more distinct meanings, it follows that it can refer to two or more distinct concepts. On the other hand, the same concept can sometimes be expressed by two or more alternative words. To better understand the relation between words and concepts we can make reference to the case of translation between different languages: when we translate a word from one language to another, we do not always literally translate the word, we focus on its meaning and we find the best way to express that same meaning into the other language. We translate concepts, not words. An example could be offered by the

²⁵ SWANTON C., “On the ‘Essential Contestedness’ of Political Concepts”, *Ethics*, Vol. 95, No. 4, p. 818.

Italian word “giusto”. Although “giusto” immediately recalls the English word “just”, the concept of “giusto” is far more extensive: it can, in different circumstances, be translated with the words “just”, “correct” or “right”.

The relation which exists between concepts and the world consists, instead, in a *description*. The properties which constitute the necessary and sufficient condition of a concept provide the basis for the indication of which parts of the world the concept refers to: they define the extension concept. Regardless of whether the concept we are focusing upon is commonly considered a normative or empirical concept, it will always offer some kind of description²⁶. Both descriptive and normative concepts normally include some elements that specify to which parts of the world these concepts refer to.

Another distinction needs to be introduced: that between concept and conception, as proposed by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. Some scholars, like Steven Lukes, make reference to this distinction when talking of the essential contestability theory. They suggest that the disagreement to which essential contestability theory refers is about the appropriateness of different *conceptions* of a same *concept*. This interpretation is intuitively misleading. According to Rawls a ‘concept’ consists in an abstract and general definition, while a ‘conception’ consists in a particular and detailed interpretation of the same concept. It is evident that the Rawlsian distinction implies some fundamental commonalities between different interpretations of a *same* concept, an occurrence that is clearly at odds with the premises of essential contestability. As illustrated in the previous sections, essential contestability theory does not provide any reason to suggest that the disagreeing parts share some – either abstract and general – elements of the meaning.

But if we cannot use the Rawlsian distinction to indicate the relation between an ‘essentially contested concept’ and its different definitions, and we do not have, as I have underlined earlier, any other basis for stating that we are talking about the *same* concept, are we still sure that what it is involved in the essential disagreements are concepts, and not only words? Andrew Mason suggests, on this point, that:

“[the] essentially contestedness theses (...) would, however, be better expressed by saying that key moral and political *terms* are essentially contested, rather than by saying that key moral and political *concepts* are essentially contested, in order to

²⁶ On this point see CARTER I., “In What Sense Freedom is Value-free?”, paper presented at the “Conference on ‘Concepts and Measures of Freedom’”, Paris Descartes University, 15-16 October 2009.

avoid the objection that terms such as ‘justice’ or ‘democracy’ are used by different people to express different concepts²⁷”.

According to this perspective, essential contestability seems to indicate a necessary disagreement about *words*, instead of *concepts*. The dispute, then, lacks the requirement of genuineness, because it occurs between two different concepts: the disputants seem, in this case, to be talking past each other.

A more sophisticated position is the one assumed by Denis Robinson, who interprets disagreement about social and moral concepts as *quasi-disagreement*²⁸. As we have shown, a real disagreement requires a basic logical disagreement, which is lacking in the premises of essential contestability theory. Nonetheless, intuitively, we cannot deny that we are facing “a kind of disagreement²⁹”, a disagreement which persists and cannot be solved even when the disputants realize they are talking about two different things. Robinson’s understanding of quasi-disagreement is based on the distinction proposed by Dummett between the *conditions* of application of a concept and the *consequences* of its application:

“each of these distinct aspects is to be considered *constitutive* of a given concept. This allows a richer and more nuanced account of aspects of concept-individuation than simple application conditions accounts can provide³⁰”.

According to Robinson, application conditions and consequences of application are two different aspects of the meaning of a concept. While application conditions refers to the extension of the concept, the consequences of conceptual application, that Robinson labels “the *C-role* of that concept³¹”, can be of various kinds, including practical consequences, like emotions, attitudes and actions:

“The idea is that we can view some concepts as having some kind of commonality – as suitably “the same” – *despite* having different application conditions.

²⁷ MASON A., *Explaining Political Disagreement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 96 (emphasis as in original).

²⁸ ROBINSON D., “Moral Functionalism, Ethical Quasi-Relativism, and the Canberra Plan”, in BRADDON-MITCHELL D., NOLA R. (eds.), *Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 319.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

³¹ *Ibid.*, (emphasis as in original).

Sometimes, I think, we in effect use the ‘same concept’ so as to give priority to application conditions, sometimes as to give priority to a concept’s C-role³².

It follows that:

“The difference in application conditions accounts for the lack of basic logical disagreement, but competitions for the same C-role – the clash of competing criteria for the same consequences – accounts for there being, nonetheless, a kind of “real” disagreement³³”.

In Robinson’s perspective, then, in the case of moral and political concepts we can talk of a real disagreement – a quasi-disagreement – even in the case in which we lack the basic logical premises to show that we are talking of the same concept.

1.5 From conceptual relativism to conceptual realism?

Making reference to Robinson’s theory I would suggest that, although essential contestability theses lack the requirement necessary to state that we are dealing with a genuine conceptual dispute, we cannot totally deny that we are facing some kind of conceptual dispute. This finding, on the one hand, supports the relativistic consequences of essential contestability theory for every attempt to conceptual analysis. On the other hand, it provides a different ground for individuating conceptual divergences: according to Robinson, if the application of different interpretations of a concept does not produce the same consequences, we are not dealing with the same concept. For example, the usage of the term power by a domination theorist produces substantively different consequences with respect to the usage of the same term by an empowerment theorist. This could lead us to think that they are not dealing with the same concept.

Essential contestability theory, then adopting the “Wittgensteinian mantle in denying that concepts and words have essences³⁴”, consists in an ontological perspective about the problem of conceptual definition. However, it does not say anything about the nature or the degree of disagreement, roughly attributing its causes to different moral or epistemic value-perspectives. It is legitimate, at this point, to ask whether it is possible, instead, to imagine different levels of disagreement. At the highest level we

³² *Ibid.*, p. 338 (emphasis as in original).

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ VINCENT A., *The Nature of Political Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 98.

could suppose to have the kind of disagreement that Mason suggests calling a dispute among *essentially contestable terms*, which consists in disputes about two or more different *concepts*; at a lower level, we could expect to find disputes about different *conceptions* of a Rawlsian *concept*, and at the lowest levels disputes about very specific details of conceptual definition. Disagreement about concepts is indeed not always of the ‘fundamental’ kind which seems to be assumed in essential contestability theory. Moreover, essentially contestability theory does not disown the possibility that for certain social and political concepts it would be possible to individuate some important similarities: even if we admit that social and political concepts are ontologically ‘essentially contestable’, we could still work towards the ascertainment of some contingent commonalities in the actual usage of the same term.

The presence of invariances in the difference usages of a social or political concept can only be attested through a careful investigation. Its ascertainment will not challenge the ascription of essential contestability, because it will only show the common elements that different interpretations of a specific concept possess in the contingent situation. According to Freedén, such an operation is legitimate in the following sense:

“The guidelines adopted to tackle this issue derive from the postulate that words have indeterminate, rather than intrinsic meanings; that they are social constructs whose meaning is determined by their usage. Meaning has consequently to be ascertained empirically³⁵”.

So, the quest for invariable aspects of meaning can, in some cases, produce results:

“Inasmuch as the actual linguistic usage of a concept displays a generally shared and therefore *de facto* conventionally ‘constant’ or stable feature, that feature may be termed an ineliminable aspect of it: to eliminate it means to fly against all known usages of the concept (though this does not rule out its removal in the future)³⁶”.

Moreover, the identification of a certain pattern of meaning in different interpretations of political concepts can prescind from the problems caused by the fact/value dichotomy: it will reach a certain level of objectivity in the sense that it will

³⁵ FREEDEN M., *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

only try to register the similarities, sharing only the value-judgments which are present in all the different interpretations of the concept.

An attempt in this direction is the already quoted distinction proposed by John Rawls. Rawls suggests that it is possible to identify a *concept* of justice as distinct from its various *conceptions*. The interpretations of justice are, according to Rawls, definable as different declinations of a same extremely abstract meaning:

“it seems natural to think of the concept of justice as distinct from the various conceptions of justice and as being specified by the role which these different set of principles, these different conceptions have in common. Those who hold different conceptions of justice can, then, still agree that institutions are just when no arbitrary distinctions are made between persons in the assigning of basic rights and duties and when the rules determine a proper balance between competing claims to the advantages of social life. Men can agree to this descriptions of just institutions since the notions of an arbitrary distinction and proper balance, which are included in the concept of justice, are left open for each to interpret according to the principles of justice he accepts³⁷”.

The distinction between concepts and conceptions, then, highlights the analytical separation among the invariable part of the meaning and those aspects which are subject to change in accordance with the different normative stance of the proposer.

Another attempt to analyze the common elements of the different definitions of a concept is developed in Gerald MacCallum’s analysis of freedom. He turns his attention to the identification of the logical structure of the concept. According to him, every account of freedom can be described as a relation between three variables:

“Such freedom is thus always *of* something (an agent or agents), *from* something, *to* do, not do, become, or not become something; it is a triadic relation. Taking the format “ x is (is not) free from y to do (not do, become, not become) z ”, x ranges over agents, y ranges over such ‘preventing conditions’ as constraints, restrictions, interferences, and barriers, and z ranges over actions or conditions of character or circumstance³⁸”.

³⁷ RAWLS J., *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 5.

³⁸ MACCALLUM G.C., “Negative and Positive Freedom”, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 76, N. 3, 1967, p. 314, (emphasis as in original).

Under MacCallum's scheme, all the disputes about the definition of freedom can be interpreted as disputes among the various meanings attached to the three variables. In this way he is able to explain the differences among various accounts of freedom: in particular, he is able to reconcile the great divide between *positive* and *negative* conceptions of freedom by showing how they make reference to a same abstract and maximally general concept.

According to Carter, this kind of reasoning allows for the identification of a "purely descriptive account"³⁹ of a concept. MacCallum's analysis provides a *supra partes* description of a concept which consists in the ascertainment of the common elements of the various usages of the concept in question:

"the purpose of this maximally abstract definition of freedom is not to take sides in the *disputes* over what freedom consists in; it is an attempt to say what freedom consists in without disagreeing with *any* of the sides of those disputes⁴⁰".

MacCallum's concept of freedom is, according to Carter, *value-free* because it leaves all of its variables open for different – evaluative – interpretations of what in the real world counts as freedom. To better clarify this point, Carter proposes to abandon the Rawlsian distinction between concepts and conceptions, and he replaces it with a more effective distinction. He writes:

"I shall refer (...) to the difference between an *open* concept of freedom or justice (as identified respectively by MacCallum and Rawls) and the various *closed* concepts of freedom or justice, where a closed concept consists in a set of particular interpretations of each of the various dimensions of the open concept. The openness of a concept can be a matter of degree. The aim of MacCallum and Rawls was to specify a *fully* open concept of freedom and justice respectively. (...). Open and closed ethical concepts have different points. The point of a closed ethical concept is (...) to describe the world in such a way to provide (at least among other things) ethical evaluations and prescriptions⁴¹".

According to Carter, then, the activity of identification of an *open* concept consists in a meta-theoretical analysis of the various normative interpretations of the concept. As he writes, "the point of an *open* ethical concept is to *abstract from* differences between

³⁹ CARTER, "In What Sense Freedom is Value-free?", p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Id.*, (emphasis as in original).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12 (emphasis as in original).

normative theories⁴²”. In particular, the definition an open concept, for example, of power, consists in the *description of the concept* of power, not in *describing the world* in terms of power⁴³. Still, there is no logical reason to suppose that a fully open concept cannot be used in describing the world; nonetheless every description of the world in terms of a fully open concept would be extremely vague, since each of its criteria is left open for a great number of different interpretations⁴⁴.

Carter’s interpretation of the open concept leaves space for a weak essentialist claim. Carter suggests that, through the value-free activity of identification of a fully open concept, it is possible to identify the *essence* of that concept. According to Carter, talking of the essence of a concept does not constitute the basis for suggesting the superiority of a particular interpretation of a concept (in terms of a *closed concept*) over others – as it is, on the contrary, often claimed in philosophical debates. Moreover, the essence is not to be interpreted in a Platonic realist sense, but in line with a weaker, more human form of conceptual realism. The essence is to be found, then, in a fully open concept: “in a core of meaning common to all disagreeing parties or (...) a core feature common to all the different contexts in which the concept is applied⁴⁵”.

1.6 A meta-theoretical analysis of the concept of power

According to my perspective, Carter’s conclusion about the existence of an essence of social and political concepts is too strong a claim. As a matter of fact, the presence of an agreement about the core meaning of a concept can have a *contingent* nature: in this sense, talking about an essence would completely remove the idea that the meaning could vary in some future time. The ordinary usage of the word ‘essence’ recalls the idea that something exists *a priori*, while, in this case, conceptual analysis can merely be conducted to try *a posteriori* to attest whether similarities are currently present. Making assertions about the existence of an essence of a concept on the basis of the results obtained through the investigation of its various definitions would consist in a fallacious inference: even if we assume that concepts have an essence, there is no reason to believe that the current similarities about the usages of the same concept could reveal that essence.

⁴² *Id.*, (emphasis as in original).

⁴³ CARTER, “Three Kinds of Value-freeness in Political Philosophy”, p. 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁵ CARTER, “In What Sense Freedom is Value-free?”, p. 12.

Moreover, assuming an essentialist position would appear to force a claim that all the political, ethical and social concepts possess an essence even when it is not ascertainable through empirical conceptual analysis. This is the case, for example, of the concept of power. As I shall explain in the second part of this paper, it is not possible to identify *one* abstract and maximally general definition of the concept of power. The current usages of the concept of power, on the contrary, seem to suggest the possibility of ascertainment of two separate open concepts.

In the development of my analysis of the concept of power I shall take an intermediate position between conceptual realism and conceptual relativism: I shall endorse the ontological premises of relativism about the nature of social and political concepts. However, I shall also try to attest, through a careful empirical investigation of the various usages of the concept, whether some kind of (contingent) agreement exists about at least its more abstract features. This kind of analysis will enable me not only to ascertain the presence of the two open concepts of power, but it will provide me the analytical tools necessary for a deeper investigation of the nature and the causes of conceptual disagreement and for the identification of the values involved.

2. Predominant interpretations of power

In contemporary literature about power, probably the most influential definition is the one offered by Robert Dahl, who states that “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”. In Dahl’s account, power is assimilated to an actual or potential relation of social causation: it consists in a relation in which an actor successfully acts – or is able to act – to modify the behavior of another actor.

A similar interpretation of power is assumed by all the participants in the debate that Steven Lukes labeled the “Three Dimensional Views of Power”⁴⁶. In *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes analyzes Dahl’s conception of power, together with that of two of his most important critics, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz. He labels them respectively the one and the two-dimensional views of power, and he himself proposes the so-called three-dimensional view. Despite the differences among the three approaches, Lukes claims that they share a “common core”: they all consist in different

⁴⁶ LUKES, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

applications of the same “underlying concept” of power, according to which “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests⁴⁷”. They diverge, instead, on the relevant interpretation of “interests”: while Dahl focuses his analysis on subjective interests understood in terms of preferences expressed through political participation, the second view also includes those subjective interests which are excluded from the political debate, and Lukes goes even further, focusing, in addition, on the real (or objective) interests of which individuals are not aware.

Lukes’ analysis, then, explicitly highlights the conflictual nature of power. Moreover, it assumes power to be an intrinsically evaluative concept: if exercising power means acting against the interests of someone, the concept of power virtually collapses into the concept of “harming”. Power, then, in Lukes’ account, becomes a synonym of domination. It is worth noticing that in the second edition of *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes partially changes his mind. He recognizes that power should be interpreted as a broader concept than that of domination⁴⁸: some exercises of power can play in favor of the interests of the subjects, or at least not damage them, as in the cases, for example, of mothering or teaching. Concerning the nature of the power-wielder, Lukes’ analysis consists in an attempt to bridge the gap between methodologically individualist and structuralist approaches to power. Moreover, he suggests that power is not necessarily wield intentionally, but that it can be exercised by actors who are unaware of the consequences of their actions, or even through inaction. According to Lukes, then, locating power should consist, in these cases, in fixing responsibilities, i.e., in the identification of those who could have acted otherwise.

Undoubtedly, contemporary interpretations of power as a social relation, despite their differences, all make reference to Weber’s famous definition:

“In general, we understand by ‘power’ the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action⁴⁹”.

According to this sentence, Weber defines power as the capacity of an individual to get what she wants in a social relation even against the resistance of others. Weber’s account of power, then, consists in an opportunity concept: he offers a description of

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁸ LUKES S., *Power: A Radical View* (Second Edition), MacMillan Press, London, 2005, p. 84.

⁴⁹ WEBER M., *Economy and Society*, ROTH G. and WITTICH C. (eds.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978, (vol. 2), p. 926.

the potential power of individuals. Secondly, for Weber power is intrinsically relational, because it takes place within social actions. Thirdly, power is somehow connected to the *will* of the individual: to be considered as power, a social relation needs to be in a way to satisfy the intentions and the desires of that individual. Lastly, Weber's definition is in some way connected with the idea of conflict. Power, then, seems to be described as the possibility to act of an individual in a situation of conflict with others.

Other interpretations, following Weber, consider the intentionality of the power-wielder as a necessary requirement for the definition of power. Dennis Wrong, for example, similarly to Lukes offers an interpretation of power in terms of 'affecting', according to which social power consists in "the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others"⁵⁰. Mario Stoppino focuses as well on intentionality in his definition of power as a relation between actors' behaviors. Nonetheless, he extends the definition of power in order to include not only those relation of social causation which are intentionally initiated by the power-wielder, but also those for which the power-wielder shows a subjective interest⁵¹. Thomas Wartenberg, on the other hand, proposes to extend the interpretation of the causal link between A's and B's behavior. According to his view, "a social agent A has power over another social agent B if and only if A strategically constrains B's action-environment"⁵². Power, then, in Wartenberg's account, does not consist only in a relation in which A causes the behavior of B; on the contrary, he includes within the extension of the concept of power every situation in which A is able to interfere with B's set of choices.

The interpretation of power in terms of social causation has been challenged by a number of accounts aiming at clarifying, through the reconstruction of the etymological origin of the term and its current usage in ordinary language, the very meaning of power. Hanna Pitkin, in the same years as those of the three-dimensional debate, introduced the expressions 'power over' and 'power to' in order to indicate, respectively, relational and ability-based interpretations of power. Pitkin underlines the need to distinguish between those situations in which an actor has 'power over' another actor, which occurs only when that actor gets the other to do something, from those situations in which an actor has the power to accomplish something by herself.

⁵⁰ WRONG D., *Power: Its Forms, Bases and Uses*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, p. 2.

⁵¹ STOPPINO M., *Potere e teoria politica*, Giuffrè Editore, Milano, 2001.

⁵² WARTENBERG T. E., *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 85.

This second case, labeled ‘power to’, corresponds, in her view, to the prevailing use of the term. The very meaning of power, in her account, is to be interpreted in terms of “being able to⁵³”.

The most comprehensive and influential analysis of power in terms of ‘power to’, however, is the one proposed by Peter Morriss in *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*. Power, on his interpretation, is explicitly defined as an ability to act and to bring about outcomes. In contrast with the prevailing literature, Morriss, gives evidence to the dispositional nature of power. “Having power” refers to certain relatively enduring capacities of individuals, to certain kinds of dispositional properties an individual possesses even if they are never put into action: just as being soluble is a dispositional property of sugar, which it conserves even if it is never put into water, so power is a capacity of an individual even when it is never exercised⁵⁴.

To further clarify the dispositional nature of the concept of power, Morriss distinguishes between “ability” and “ableness” – an obsolete word virtually unused in contemporary English which represents the noun for able⁵⁵. Ability is the capacity to do something under certain hypothetical external conditions, while ableness is the capacity one has when such conditions actually occur: poor people are physically able to eat caviar, though they do not have the ableness to do so⁵⁶. The distinction between ability and ableness has nothing to do with the traditional distinction between actual and potential power, although it may recall it. It identifies two distinct meanings of “being able to” – that is, of potential power – the first referring to all the possible outcomes we could bring about if certain conditions occurred, the second referring to the narrower set of outcomes we are actually able to bring about under actual conditions. On the basis of this distinction, Morriss recognizes that what is normally meant by social and political power is specifically a form of ableness, since the investigation of power in a society is concerned with those abilities which people possess in that specific time and place, with the current distribution of resources and opportunities.

Under this interpretation, then, power does not consist in a social relation. This point is clarified by Morriss’ attempt to distinguish between the concept of power and that of influence. In doing so, he focuses on two possible meanings of power, those

⁵³ PITKIN H., *Wittgenstein and Justice*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, p. 276.

⁵⁴ MORRISS P., *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002, p. 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

covered by the concepts of “affecting” and “effecting”⁵⁷. While affecting consists in having an effect on something, in altering it, effecting consists in bringing about something. According to Morriss, power bears no necessary relation to affecting other people; “affecting” covers the semantic field of the concept of influence. The meaning of power is instead concerned with “effecting”: power consists, then, in the ability to produce certain outcomes. It is the concept of influence that indicates a social relation, while power only implies the causation of certain results. For Morriss, then, power is ‘power to’. In fact, the usage of the expression ‘power over’ is not common in everyday language: we normally ask ourselves which kinds of power people have and what they have the power to do; we very rarely wonder “over whom” people have power. At the same time, when we say that “A has power over B”, we normally imply that A has the power to make B do a lot of important things, rather than only one thing or a few insignificant things. In this latter sense, the relation described by the concept of ‘power over’ collapses into the idea of “being in somebody’s power”.

Other accounts of power do not consider ‘power to’ and ‘power over’ as competing concepts. They suggest, instead, that both should be included in order to offer a comprehensive understanding of power. For Keith Dowding, for example, ‘power to’ and ‘power over’ are to be interpreted as two analytically distinct parts of the overall definition of power. He refers to ‘power to’ in terms of “outcome power” and to ‘power over’ as “social power”⁵⁸. According to Dowding, outcome power is the more basic interpretation of power: having ‘power over’ someone necessarily includes some kinds of ‘power to’ act. In addition, his approach underlines that both outcome and social power are related to the production of certain effects. While outcome power is defined in terms of the abilities an actor possesses to bring about certain outcomes, social power is interpreted as the ability of an actor to deliberately change the structure of incentives – by which is meant the full set of costs and benefits attached to certain behaviors – of another actor, in order to bring about certain outcomes. What characterizes social power, then, is the deliberate action of the power-holder that aims to change the incentive structure of the power-subject: also in the case in which an actor exercises his outcome power somebody else’s incentive structure could be affected, but, in this case, this result will not be deliberately chosen. According to Dowding, then, social and outcome power are two possible forms that political power

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵⁸ DOWDING K.M., *Rational Choice and Political Power*, Aldershot, Edwan Elgar, 1991, p. 48.

can take. But while the former consists in a relation between actors, the latter need not involve more than one actor: outcome power becomes political power only in the case in which its exercise produces side-effects that conflict with other actors' interests.

The usage of the expressions 'power over' and 'power to' has recently been taken up in normative political theory, in particular among feminist and empowerment theorists. Here, the usage of 'power to' and 'power over' does not refer to competing conceptions of the very notion of power, but generally indicates two different normative interpretations of power. In feminist theory, 'power to' and 'power over' are regarded as two totally distinct forms of power: 'power over' is the illegitimate domination exercised by men over women, while 'power to' consists in the legitimate power which women can acquire in order to face male domination. This distinction is inspired by, and partly recalls, Hanna Arendt's account of power. Arendt distinguishes between power and violence: every exercise of power of one person over another consists in a form of violence, and it does not deserve the label 'power'; power deserves this name only when it is legitimate, i.e., only when it consists in the ability of the group to act collectively⁵⁹. Some authors, proceeding from this normative perspective, propose a further distinction: they suggest a quadripartite analysis of power where by 'power over' is meant the actual, illegitimate distribution of power in the society and 'power to', 'power with' (the ability to act together) and 'power from within' (the individual's awareness of her own capacities which motivate the action) are different aspects or phases of the process of empowerment⁶⁰.

In feminist theory, the most complete analysis of the distinction is that proposed by Amy Allen. Allen defines 'power over' as "the ability of an actor to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way⁶¹". Following Lukes, she claims that the exercise of 'power over' is not necessarily intentional, since it can be exercised in routine ways by actors who are unaware of their power: this is so in most cases of male-female power relations. Although in feminist theory the expression 'power over' is mainly used interchangeably with that of domination, Allen proposes a distinction between the two concepts: domination is a subfield of the concept of 'power over', referring only to those occurrences of 'power over' in which power is explicitly exercised in a way that is detrimental for the power-

⁵⁹ ARENDT H., *On Violence*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1970, p. 44.

⁶⁰ TOWNSEND J., ZAPATA E., ROWLANDS J., ALBERTI P. & MERCADO M., *Women and Power: Fighting Patriarchies and Poverty*, Zed Books, London, 1999.

⁶¹ ALLEN A., "Rethinking Power", *Hypatia*, 13, 1998, p. 33.

subjects. 'Power to', by contrast, is explicated in terms of the concept of empowerment: Allen suggests that the two terms can almost be used as synonyms. 'Power to' is interpreted as the ability to attain certain ends; nonetheless, in her account this expression only indicates the power to act acquired by subordinate groups despite their subordination, particularly in the case of women against male domination. In her interpretation, 'power over' and 'power to' (together with 'power with', which consists in the collective exercise of 'power to') are analytically different aspects of power which show a high degree of interrelatedness: in the case of women's empowerment, 'power to' can be exercised by women in order to achieve a more legitimate distribution of power, which includes the obtainment of some sort of 'power over' men. However, these different aspects of power can all be interpreted on the basis of a more general and abstract concept of power: for Allen, as Pitkin and Morriss, having power means "being able to"⁶². But, unlike the other two scholars, she reserves the usage of the expression 'power to' only to a subfield of "being able", specifically, to the power acquired by a subordinate individual or group through the process of empowerment.

2.1 Towards two open concepts of power

According to my analysis, a detailed investigation of the literature allows for the identification not of a single, unified open concept of power, but of two separate and totally distinguished open concepts.

The expressions 'power over' and 'power to' have appeared quite recently in theoretical debates about power. They conform, at a very general level, to the distinction between two main interpretations of power: 'power over' refers to an asymmetrical relation between two or more actors, while 'power to' consists in the ability of the actor herself to carry out certain specific outcomes.

Although different theoretical perspectives propose different criteria for the definition of the two concepts, it is possible to identify some common traits. The various usages of 'power over' all agree in interpreting it as a relation between actors, specifically as a relation of social causation. A lot has been written about the connection between the concept of power and that of social cause: for some authors the two concepts share the same extension, according to others, power is instead to be considered the specific kind of social causation resulting from the intentions of the power-wielder. 'Power to' is also explicated in terms of causation. However, the

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

difference lies in the fact that while ‘power over’ means causing behavior on the part of others, ‘power to’ refers to the ability to cause certain outcomes or states of affairs. Moreover, ‘power to’ is a dispositional concept: it refers to the capacity an actor possesses to bring about specific outcomes, not to her action of producing those results. By contrast, the concept of ‘power over’ is described as both actual and potential: the phenomenon of power is identified both with the fact of an agent actually affecting the behavior of another, and with her having the ability to do so at some future time. Lastly, while ‘power to’ is commonly interpreted as a property of individuals or of groups, ‘power over’ has been attributed, by different approaches, to individuals, collectivities, institutions and social structures.

It is worth noticing that, though the origin of the distinction lies in theoretical efforts to clarify the very meaning of the concept of power, the expressions ‘power to’ and ‘power over’ have recently enjoyed a new lease of life within critical approaches and feminist theories, serving to indicate two distinct forms of power. In the latter cases the distinction between the two expressions relies on normative criteria: while ‘power over’ is thought of as necessarily conflictual and is mostly used as a synonym for domination, ‘power to’ is regarded as a consensual and intrinsically legitimate form of power.

At this point of my analysis, a further clarification is necessary. Following my perspective, a reference to normative criteria like consensual/conflictual, domination/empowerment and legitimate/illegitimate is not necessary to efficiently draw the demarcation line between ‘power to’ and ‘power over’. In the following sections, I shall explain why a correct understanding of the two open concepts should not be based on normative criteria. In addition, I will try to suggest why so many scholars have been misled by this perspective.

2.2 Conflictual *vs.* consensual views of power

Steven Lukes, among others, bases his conception of power on the existence of a conflict of interests between the power-holder and the power-subject. Assuming that ‘power’ is necessarily conflictual, he criticizes those approaches, like Arendt’s and Parsons’, which offer a consensual interpretation of power. Consequently, he uses the expression ‘power over’ to indicate conflictual understandings of power, and ‘power to’ to define consensual ones. Both Arendt and Parsons affirm, in effect, although with different nuances, the existence of a necessary relation between power and legitimacy.

However, while Parsons understands power as a relation of command and obedience in which violence could still play an active, though residual role, Arendt completely excludes coercion from her analysis of power. The relation of command and obedience completely disappears from Arendt's interpretation of power: what counts is the autonomy of the individual, which is preserved only by collective participation in the exercise of power. The difference between power (power to) and violence (power over) consists in the fact that the former only exists when it is the expression of a collective activity based on the overall consensus, while the latter is exercised on the basis of conflicts of interests. In this sense, Arendt's analysis of power shifts the problem of the definition of power to the definitions of 'consensus' and 'legitimacy'.

Lukes' interpretation of power as necessarily involving conflict is due, at least partially, to his evaluative use of the concept. For the most part, in his analysis, the concept of power seems virtually to collapse into that of 'harming'. However, it is worth noticing that in the second edition of *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes partially changes his mind. He recognizes that some exercises of power can play in favor of the interests of the subjects, or at least do not damage them, as in the cases, for example, of mothering or teaching⁶³. Moreover, he seems to override the reference to the interests of the power subjects, asserting that we can include in the extension of power "command-obedience relationships that are indispensable to valued-cooperative activities, as in armies, orchestra conducting and sport coaching⁶⁴". Assuming, then, that in some circumstances power could be "productive, transformative, authoritative and compatible with dignity⁶⁵", he finally suggests distinguishing between 'power over' and domination.

Lukes' change of perspective in comparison to the first edition of the book is explicitly inspired by Wartenberg's detailed analysis of 'power over'. Thomas Wartenberg describes two ways in which 'power over' can be seen as beneficial for its subjects. The first is labeled *paternalistic* power:

⁶³ As Peter Morriss highlights: "Lukes, then, notices that we can often benefit from the power of others". MORRISS P., "Steven Lukes on the Concept of Power", *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 4, 2006, p. 132.

⁶⁴ LUKES, *Power: A Radical View* (Second Edition), p. 84.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

“A relationship of power-over between two agents is paternalistic when the dominant agent uses his power to benefit an agent who is not fully capable of rational determination of his action⁶⁶”.

This kind of power is based, according to the author, “upon the subordinate agent’s inability to judge his own interests rationally⁶⁷”. The other beneficial form of power consists in *transformative* power:

“In a transformative use of power, a dominant agent also exercise power over a subordinate agent for the latter’s benefit. In doing so, (...) the dominant agent attempts to exercise his power in such a way that the subordinate agent learns certain skills that undercut the power differential between her and the dominant agent⁶⁸”.

Amy Allen is also quoted by Lukes in his attempt to separate the concept of ‘power over’ from its negative implications. Allen suggests that ‘power over’ is not necessarily detrimental to the interests of its subjects. On the contrary, there are cases in which the exercise of power is to be seen as beneficial:

“For example, a basketball coach exercises a certain amount of power over her players: She has the ability to constrain their options as basketball players in nontrivial ways by deciding what will happen in practice, who will play in which position, who will start the game, and so on. (...) coaches are there to help players develop new skills, increase their confidence, and, if all goes well, experience the pleasure of the victory. Each of these goals points to a use of power which is not harmful⁶⁹”.

If in the first edition of *Power: A Radical View*, then, power, as necessarily harmful, was interpreted as a synonym of domination, in the second edition Lukes agrees with Wartenberg and Allen in reserving the term ‘domination’ for a specific subfield of ‘power over’: power that is detrimental to others’ interest. I shall treat this point in detail in the following section.

For the moment, I wish to suggest that what emerges from this analysis is that the presence of a conflict (among preferences or interests) is not a necessary condition

⁶⁶ WARTENBERG, *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation*, p. 183.

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁶⁹ ALLEN A., *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*. Westview Press, Boulder (CO), 1999, p. 125.

for the definition of ‘power over’. According to this perspective, the formulation of the open concept of ‘power over’ in terms of “social causation” is the more suitable to offer a clear understanding of the various usages of the expression, and, at the same time, to allow comparison with the concept of ‘power to’. In fact, if ‘power over’ is not necessarily conflictual, any attempt to distinguish between ‘power to’ and ‘power over’ on the basis on their consensual or conflictual nature is pointless. However, I will go back to this point later, in order to produce further reasons to support this claim.

2.3 *Power over vs. domination*

As I have previously shown, ‘power over’ and domination are frequently used as synonyms, in particular, by those adopting normative approaches to power. The identification of some ‘positive’ usages of ‘power over’ of the kinds suggested above has led some scholars to propose a differentiation between ‘power over’ and domination. Amy Allen, for example, considers domination to be a subfield of ‘power over’. She writes: “Although domination represents one way of exercising power over others, the terms *domination* and *power over* cannot be simply synonymous⁷⁰”. If we accept the existence of positive exercises of power over others, then we should recognize that “*power over* must be a broader concept than *domination*⁷¹”. Thus, according to Allen:

“we might define *domination* with reference to a normative criterion (...): Domination entails the ability of an actor or a set of actors to constrain the choices of another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way and in a way that works to the others’ disadvantage⁷²”.

A more sophisticated interpretation is offered by Thomas Wartenberg, who shares with Allen the reference to normative criteria. According to Wartenberg, domination consists in a particular ‘usage’ of ‘power over’, specifically, a negative use of it, as opposed to its beneficial usages like paternalistic and transformative power. For Wartenberg, we should use the term domination only:

“to refer to the power that one social agent has over another agent in situations in which that power is exercised by the dominating social agent over the dominated

⁷⁰ *Id.* (emphasis as in original).

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.*

social agent repeatedly, systematically, and to the detriment of the dominated agent⁷³”.

The author, then, includes more than one criterion to describe a situation of domination. Firstly, in agreement with Allen, he focuses on the normative criterion: “A relationship between two agent is an instances of domination only if the dominated agent is specifically harmed through the relationship⁷⁴”. Moreover, he introduces a second, this time descriptive, criterion: a power relationship needs to be *stable* in order to be defined as domination. He writes:

“When using the term ‘domination’, I shall not, first of all, be referring to single interactions between two agents, to single exercises of power. (...). ‘Domination’ refers not to a single exercise of power but to a relationship between two social agents that is constituted by the existence of a power differential between them⁷⁵”.

Then, as emerging from the preceding quotations, Wartenberg introduces a third criterion for the definition of domination: the existence of a *differential of power* between the two actors involved in the relation.

A reference to the stability of the relationship and to the differential of power in the definition of domination is shared by Jeffrey Isaac, who, in his understanding of power as ‘power to’, explicitly equates ‘power over’ with domination: according to him, the expression ‘power over’ is to be assimilated to the expression ‘being in somebody’s power’. He writes:

“The concept of domination (...) refers neither to a contingent regularity nor to mere social difference; it refers to structurally asymmetrical relationship, whereby one element of the relationship has power over another in virtue of its structural power to direct the practices of the other⁷⁶”.

It is worth noticing that a certain degree of *asymmetry* in a relation between two actors seems to be a necessary condition to define not only domination, but also a relation of ‘power over’: in the absence of this condition every accidental relation of

⁷³ WARTENBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁷⁶ ISAAC J.C., *Power and Marxist Theory: A Realist View*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1987, p. 84.

social causation could be considered as power, but it will not conform to the prevailing usage of the term. The existence of a so-called ‘differential of power’, then, in my view, cannot be considered as the principal criterion of distinction between ‘domination’ and ‘power over’. However, after some specifications, it will be possible to suggest that it is exactly on the ‘degree’ of asymmetry of the relation that a good understanding of the difference between ‘power over’ and ‘domination’ should be based. Preliminary step will be the explanation of what we refer to when we are talking of asymmetry. In fact, as it immediately emerges, making reference to the ‘differential of power’ in order to define a ‘relation of power’ consists in a circular definition.

To offer an exhaustive account of the role of ‘asymmetry’ in the definition of power, it is useful to make reference to Peter Blau’s exchange theory. According to Blau, relations of power consist in an exchange of *services and rewards* between different actors. The possibility of producing and offering those services and rewards is distributed unequally among the society. In the case in which the two actors involved in the exchange are in a symmetrical relation, which means that they can both produce the services or rewards in which the other is interested, none of them has power over the other: “Interdependence and mutual influence of equal strength indicate lack of power⁷⁷”. For Blau, then, exchanges are to be considered as involving power only in the case in which one actor is dependent on the other actor for the obtainment of certain kind of services:

“Power is conceptualized as inherently asymmetrical and as resting on their net ability of a person to withhold rewards from and apply punishments to others (...). Its source is one-sided dependence⁷⁸”.

Dependence, however, is a matter of degree. The differential of power between two actors can be drawn on a continuum, where on the one side we find a minimal level of asymmetry which presupposes a low level of dependency, while on the other side we find the maximum level of asymmetry, characterized by the “monopolization of needed rewards⁷⁹” and a total unilateral dependency.

Similarly to Blau, Mario Stoppino bases his understanding of the asymmetry of power relations on an exchange theory of power. On the basis of this analysis,

⁷⁷ BLAU P.M., “Differentiation of Power”, in BELL R., EDWARDS D.V., WAGNER R.H. (Eds.), *Political Power: A Reader in Theory and Research*, The Free Press, New York, 1969, p. 294.

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

Stoppino proposes some fruitful guidelines for the distinction between power and domination. According to Stoppino, asymmetry in the relation between actors is to be sought in the differential of the *resources* they possess. In the case of perfect symmetry between the value of the resources held by the two actors in a relationship, there is a situation of reciprocal interdependency. In the case, on the contrary, in which one actor possesses all the resources important for another actor, and the second actor possesses no resources to offer in exchange, we face a situation of unilateral dependency, which, according to Stoppino, is to be defined as an instance of domination. Between these two extreme situations, there are all the cases in which an actor has power over another actor with respect to specific resources and specific behaviors.

For Stoppino, then, the difference between power and domination is a question not of kind but of degree. He offers some conditions for the definition of domination: 1) A possesses resources which are salient for B; 2) A possesses a monopoly of the resources salient for B; 3) B has no resources which are salient to A; 4) B cannot use violence, or resources of a different kind, against A⁸⁰. According to this author, the resources of power can be divided into three groups: power can be based on economic resources, symbolic resources, or resources of violence. Domination, then, can be of a different nature according to which kind of resources it is based on. Stoppino labels the three ideal-types, respectively, economic domination, symbolic domination and coercive domination. However, in social reality, instances of domination are more likely to be based on more than one kind of resource.

Defined in this way, domination, like ‘power over’, does not depend on normative criteria. Domination does not consist in a particular usage of ‘power over’; rather, it describes a particular model of distribution of ‘power over’ within a social relation or even a society. A reference to the interests of the subject it is not necessary for the definition of domination. In fact, some situation of domination, like some exercises of power, can be beneficial to the interests of the subjects, like, for example, in the case of a paternalism.

What needs to be highlighted, at this point of the analysis, is that the negative evaluation of terms like power (meant as ‘power over’) and domination – common both in the philosophical literature and in ordinary language – is not to be attributed to

⁸⁰ STOPPINO, *Potere e teoria politica*, pp. 163-198.

a real evaluation of the situations – in terms of the morally good or bad consequences they produce – described by these concepts. ‘Power over’ and domination are considered negatively, i.e., illegitimate, because of their intrinsic nature, which is in clear contrast to the recognition of the value of individual *autonomy*. If what we are interested in is the autonomy of the individual, then, every *relation of power* – even if it takes a ‘beneficial’ form, like in the case of paternalistic or transformative power – is to be considered illegitimate.

An exhaustive understanding of domination, then, does not have to refer to normative criteria. Nonetheless, on the basis of the definition I have proposed, it is possible to suggest that domination, unlike ‘power over’, could be seen as an intrinsically negative concept on the basis of another external, normative criterion: the faith in *equality* as the fundamental value on which to shape our society, which presupposes, for example, in nowadays democratic societies, to minimize the differential of power between different actors. Domination, then, does not provide an antonym for ‘legitimate’ or consensual power; on the contrary, it should be used in opposition to a pluralistic model of distribution of power.

3. Two open concepts of power: *power over* and *power to*

At this point of the analysis it seems possible to offer an account of the two open concepts of ‘power over’ and ‘power to’.

The open concept of ‘power over’ is to be interpreted in terms of an *asymmetrical relation of social causation*. ‘Power over’, then, consists in a relation between four terms: an agent *A*; the action x of *A*; an agent *B*; the action z of *B*. The various closed concepts of ‘power over’ diverge on the basis of the different interpretation they offer for the four variables. Table 3.1 provides a partial enumeration of the different understandings of the terms involved.

Table 3.1: *The 'closure' of the concept of 'power over'*

Actor A	Action x	Actor B	Action z
Individual actor; Collective actor; Institution; Social structure.	Persuasion; Coercion; Remuneration; Manipulation; Conditioning ⁸¹ ; Intentional; Interested; Unintended (unaware); Inaction; Harmful; Beneficial.	Individual actor; Collective actor; Society.	Compliant behavior. Against B 's interests; In B 's interests

The extension of a closed concept of 'power over', then, can vary in order to include a different number of forms of power, from remuneration to manipulation, from coercion to conditioning.

Different closed concepts can consider 'power over' an attribute of single individuals, of collectivities, of institutions or of the social structure itself. The subject of power, moreover, can be considered an individual, a collectivity or an entire community.

The relation of power between two agents can present different degree of asymmetry, ranging from a lower level in which the power of A over B consists in the obtainment of a few and insignificant behaviors, to a maximal level in which A is able to control almost every possible action of B . According to this perspective, assessments of the incidence of power in a society depend on the extension of the closed concept, and could vary from a perfect pluralistic model of distribution of power to a model characterized by domination.

Lastly, evaluative interpretations of power can range from a positive appraisal, as in the case of mothering or of transformative usages of power, to a negative judgment, as when the concept of power is used with reference to those situations in

⁸¹ Conditioning consists in the modification of the material and social environment. This illustrative interpretation of the forms of power is based on STOPPINO M., "A Formal Classification of Power", *Homo Oeconomicus*, 24, 2007, pp. 21-23. See also STOPPINO, *Potere e teoria politica*.

which the interests of the subjects are harmed. Other accounts, on the contrary, treat power as an objective and not eliminable phenomenon of social life.

Moreover, some perspectives consider as ‘power over’ only those relations of social causation in which A intentionally acts in order to obtain a compliant behavior from B . Others include in their closed concept situations in which an actor acts non-intentionally, or is even unaware of the consequences of her action. Some others, in addition, claim that exercises of ‘power over’ can also be characterized by the inaction of the power-wielder.

The open concept of ‘power to’, on the other hand, is to be identified with the notion of *ability*. It consists in a triadic relation which occurs between an actor A' , an action or outcome x' and the resources π necessary to perform action x' . Closed concepts of ‘power to’, then, differ according to the way in which they interpret the various terms of the relation, as it is shown in table 3.2.

Table 3.2: *The closure of the concept of ‘power to’*

Actor A'	Resources π	Action x'
Individual actor; Collective actor; “A woman”; “The powerless”.	Internal resources; External resources; Institutional resources.	Every kind of action (or outcome) A' intends to carry out. Legitimate; Illegitimate

The extension of the different closed concepts of ‘power to’ can vary in order to include all the human abilities, from the basic physical and mental abilities of the individual, to the abilities which are determined by the social and institutional context. Both my ability to walk and the Prime Minister’s ability to dissolve the Parliament are considered, by some theorists, as cases of ‘power to’. Within normative accounts, like feminist and empowerment theories of power, the extension of the concept is reduced to those situations in which the individual is considered legitimated to wield her power, like in the case of a woman facing male-domination. Moreover, they can include in their definition of ‘power to’ only certain kinds of action on the basis of a moral

criterion. Other approaches, by contrast, include within 'power to' also those abilities which allow one to perform certain morally disapproved activities, like, for example, the ability to kill someone. In most of the cases 'power to' is ascribed to individuals, with the exception of Arendt's account and of those approaches which include a specific subfield of 'power to', that is 'power with', the ability to act together, for which, however, they use a different expression.

3.1 Conclusion

In this paper I have pursued a double intent. In the first part I have tried to propose a way of conducting conceptual analysis which is not affected by the problems caused by the acceptance of a relativistic claim about the nature of social and political concepts. Following the arguments proposed by Ian Carter, I have offered some good reasons to uphold the possibility of producing value-free definitions of concepts. According to Carter, only a fully open concept can be considered value-free, because it consists in the maximally general and abstract meaning which is common to all the various definitions of a concept.

However, I have disagreed with Carter in assimilating the open concept to the essence of that concept. Even in this weaker version, essentialism runs the risk of suggesting that the usages of social and political concepts never vary over the time. Moreover, assuming an essentialist position seems to involve the claim that every concept possesses an essence ascertainable through serious conceptual analysis. According to my theses, the identification of an open concept allows us to attest some contingent commonalities about the various usages of a concept, but does not say anything about the variations in the meaning of the concept which can occur in the future. In addition, an in-depth investigation of the different interpretations of the concept of power, allows me to suggest that, at least in this case, an essence of the concept does not exist.

In the second part of this paper, I have proposed to differentiate between two distinct open concepts of power. The current usages of the term, in fact, do not provide the ground for the identification of a single, unified, open concept of power. Nonetheless, they present some similarities which allow for the distinction between two major groups of concepts. According to these findings, it has been possible to identify two open concepts, which represent those abstract and maximally general elements which are shared by the different interpretations of power. The open

concepts of 'power over' and 'power to', then, are to be considered as value-free definitions of power which are able to describe all the current usages of the term.

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