

Editorial

PHILOSOPHY, ARGUMENTATION AND FANATISM

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During a class of the course on Philosophy and Rhetoric, a student expressed his views on the impossibility to settle many of our disagreements through dialogue. He would say that proof of this fact was the impossibility to convince a religious fanatic to stop using his body as an instrument to leap into terrorist action. The argument on the disagreements developed within a presentation of Walter Brice Gallie's thesis (1998) on "essentially contested concepts", also called "controversial concepts". According to this British philosopher, influenced by Wittgenstein's theses, traditional philosophy has unsuccessfully dealt with the issue of disagreement on the definitions of certain fundamental concepts.

When it comes to the definition of such controversial concepts, persuading opponents about the convenience of certain definitions has been said to be the solution, in fervent belief that such opponents will eventually agree, or accept the impossibility to find a rational certainty of which definition is better. For Gallie, the notion that philosophy could be taken as some kind of "engine of thought" getting rid of conceptual confusions is basically a rebutted idea. On the contrary, it seems necessary to examine different uses of terms, and the main arguments to introduce them. This way to look at the problem makes it evident that there is not such a thing as THE standard or proper use of a contested term (1998, p.6). Although one could think that identifying different uses and functions of controversial terms may help settle disputes between contradicting parties, the truth is that each side remains in its defense position, leaning on equally convincing arguments and evidence. It would seem here that no theory of argumentation can be held as legitimate, if it is to be understood as the one to build tools to settle any dispute over opposite positions. This is considered another defeat for traditional philosophy and its confidence in the likelihood of schools, trends, political groups or common people having an argument to accept those definitions opposing the ones they defend, thus putting a stop to religious, ethical, political, esthetic or scientific disputes.

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The question raised by Gallie is precisely related to the worth of those apparently ceaseless arguments for philosophy. Should it keep on searching for a general principle to settle the issue of which rival use is right? Or, on the contrary, should it give up that search and sink into what has been labeled by Stuart Hampshire as “new obscurantism”, or the disrepute of reason as an effective means to settle conflict? Gallie says: “In spite of not being solvable through any kind of argument, [essentially contested concepts] rely on perfectly respectable arguments and evidence. This is what I mean by saying there are essentially contested concepts, concepts whose appropriate use implies, inevitably, endless arguments among users about the proper uses” (1988, p.8)

To Gallie, what really matters is keeping this halo of respectability and rationality around the disputing positions, and aiming at the search of tools, called semi-formal conditions, allowing the identification of really controversial and permanently shifting concepts. Essentially contested concepts are those which lack “an agreement between the user and whoever disputes its particular usage, in reference to that *kind* of usage that is considered appropriate for the concept at issue” (1998, 5), and where, in spite of the impossibility to finish the argument on determining the right definition, the conflict is perfectly legitimate (1998, p.8).

By means of a game, (an artificial) point of departure with competing teams in permanent struggle, the acceptance of *one* criterion to determine the *champion* becomes difficult to everyone, given that each party proposes its own tenet. Gallie claims seven semi-formal conditions that should be met by any concept of this kind: (I) It must be evaluative, that is, the concept should certify some kind of acknowledged achievement; (II) the achievement must be internally complex in its structure; (III) the explanation of its worth should include references to the share of contributions made by each party; (IV) the concept should admit modifications in case of shifting conditions, and those modifications should not be predictable; (V) each player or group acknowledges that the use they give to the concept is being challenged by other groups and is aware of the criteria their adversaries rely on; (VI) the concept in dispute must have spun off from an original model whose authority is acknowledged by all the rival users or players; and finally (VII) the concept is kept and it develops because there is controversy that allows such development. The first five conditions provide a definition of essential contestability, but do not allow the distinction between legitimate and inadequate uses, which is why conditions six and seven have to be added (1998, p. 20).

Gallie applies these conditions to the concepts of art, Christian life, democracy and social justice. The concept of ‘democracy’ is essentially contested because (I) it is evaluative; in fact, it is the evaluative concept *par excellence*. Proof of this is the fact that any important political decision (likely to be compared with a *move* in the game) made in the last 150 years, has usually been assessed as either democratic or not. That is to say, from Gallie’s perspective, important political decisions are usually either accepted or rejected. The concept of democracy complies with conditions (II) and (III), since it is internally complex, and admits a variety of descriptions in which its sundry aspects are classified into diverse orders of importance. It also complies with condition (IV) given its open character, that is, because democratic aspirations change in a particular society, according to their circumstances. Besides (V) “the concept [...] may be

employed both aggressively and defensively” (1998, p. 28). (VI) Its different uses “claim for a model’s authority”, such as that of the French revolution and (VII) “competition is likely to [...] by acknowledging rival uses [...] lead to the optimum development of both the fuzzy aims, and the bewildering achievements of democratic tradition” (1998, p. 28)

I think the most important thing about this approach is its isolation of empirical facts as means to study political concepts such as democracy and social justice. Therefore, we face a kind of analysis in which the significance of concepts is not derived from “facts”, or from research providing the tools to choose the right one among rival uses. Although the argument about the ‘right’ use of these concepts may never end, according to Gallie, it is possible, by means of this awareness and new views on the nature of language, “to show the rationality of a certain individual’s continuous usage (or in the most drastic case of conversion: *usage change*) of the concept at issue” (1998, p.31). Nevertheless, two consequences could arise from this idea: a positive and a negative one. The former, very optimistic indeed, suggests that the acknowledgement of the essential contestability of a given concept will yield an improvement of the arguments and discussions between the rival groups. The latter, the negative one, is that the defense of each group’s usage of the concept will persist, as well as the attempts to get rid of the opponent, as knockout is thought to be the only way to ensure victory, which unfortunately leads to persistently using one’s own body as a weapon to defend a cause through the elimination of the Other (1998, p. 36–37).

References

Gallie, W. B. (1988). Conceptos esencialmente impugnados. En W. B. Gallie, Conceptos esencialmente impugnados (G. Ortiz, Trad.1 ed., Vol. 49, págs. 5–42). México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.