**The Impact of Positivism: Academic Political Thought in Britain, c. 1945-70**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the nature of academic political theory in Britain in the post-war period, examining in particular the degree to which theorists were able to mount normative theoretical arguments. Traditionally, commentators such as Brian Barry and Perry Anderson have argued that political theory in this period was largely dead between 1945 and 1970 due to the impact of positivism, but I argue this is mistaken for two main reasons. First, it fails to distinguish between the different forms that positivism took in the post-war era. Thus although it is true many theorists tended to claim that moral and political values could (or should) not be discussed rationally, their reasons for doing so varied considerably. For while theorists such as A. J. Ayer and T. D. Weldon justified their positions theoretically, with arguments drawn from behaviourist social science or innovations made in linguistic philosophy, others, such as Ralf Dahrendorf and Anthony Crosland, argued that it was the perceived success of post-war welfare states or the alleged failure of political ideologies that made traditional political theory irrelevant. Second, following on from this, I argue that delineating more accurately how positivism actually operated helps to explain how political theorists were able to pursue their discipline normatively - albeit that few reacted to *all* aspects of positivism. Thus if some (such as Karl Popper) were more concerned to insist that political philosophy had something to say in practice, others (such as Michael Oakeshott), reacted more strongly against the proposition that human behaviour can be understood purely causally. Finally, I examine the impact of ordinary language philosophy on post-war political theory, and argue that rather than simply damaging the cause of normative political theory by encouraging a myopic concentration on the linguistic analysis of particular moral and political concepts, over the longer term, its effects were much more positive, since it helped to focus attention on the irreducibly normative dimension of political concepts.

At first sight, the project of trying to explore what was happening in the realm of political theory in the post-war era in Britain seems to be a highly unpromising one. For, especially amongst academic political theorists and historians, it has been widely assumed that in the period between the end of the Second World War and around 1970, there were few writers in Britain producing “political thought” or “political theory” genuinely worthy of the name. In particular, until 1971, it is often argued, when the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* appeared, there was nothing that really counted as traditional political theory as it had been practiced by Aristotle, Hobbes or Mill, since earlier post-war thinkers had essentially eschewed systematic normative argument.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although academic commentators usually concede that there was some stimulating work done on the history of political thought in this period, in other words, notably by such luminaries as Michael Oakeshott and John Plamenatz,[[2]](#footnote-2) and even some interesting analysis of particular political concepts produced by (for example) Isaiah Berlin and Richard Wollheim,[[3]](#footnote-3) they tend to argue that it is only with Rawls's work that political theory returned to its traditional role. This is because only with *A Theory of Justice*, they maintain, did an author once again produce an argument that was not only genuinely normative, and practical in scope – arguing in particular in favour of a particular conception of justice as “fairness” - but also one that was prosecuted really systematically, in Rawls's case buttressed by an impressive array of support from such diverse sources as social choice theory, Kantian refutations of utilitarianism, and 18th century social contract theory. Thus for Alan Ryan, what marks out Rawls's theory is its theoretical ambition in trying to provide “a systematic and comprehensive theory of justice, starting from minimal first principles”[[4]](#footnote-4) which at the same time enables theorists to take up a reasoned position in practice on politically controversial issues – such as on civil disobedience and social justice – in a manner reminiscent of John Stuart Mill. And equally for Brian Barry, what is stimulating about Rawls's work is partly its intense ambition – in trying to deduce universal principles of justice using such theoretical devices as “the original position” and “the veil of ignorance” - but even more its determination to prove that one could sustain (at considerable length) a genuinely rational argument about competing moral and political values.[[5]](#footnote-5) By contrast, according to such writers, such rational argument was impossible in the 1950s and 1960s due to the hold that positivism had over philosophy and the social sciences. For because positivism maintained that no rational justification of any kind could be given for espousing any particular course of action in practice, it logically implied that all value judgments (including those about political values) were reduced to the status of being purely emotive utterances. This meant that political theorists were therefore forced to content themselves with merely trying to clarify the nature of moral or political concepts, or at best to try and arbitrate between the plausible intuitive claims made on behalf of competing social values[[6]](#footnote-6) – for no genuine rational synthesis of competing moral and political values (in the manner of Rawls, or traditional political theory) was held to be possible.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Is such an account of the decline of post-war political theory in Britain correct? Certainly, it is one that clearly echoes those of many theorists of the 1950s and 1960s themselves, since although such theorists also cited increased professionalization as a cause for the decline of political theory, or alternatively a general lack of interest in political “causes” more widely, many authors did indeed tend to lament the absence of a major political theorist[[8]](#footnote-8) and blame the demise of political theory on the rise of positivism in philosophy and the social sciences. Thus although Peter Laslett to some extent blamed the rise of professional sociology and the idea that politics was increasingly regarded as “too serious to be left to philosophers” for his notorious conclusion that “for the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead” in 1956,[[9]](#footnote-9) he was pretty clear that logical positivism was the main culprit, claiming that its rise had “called into question the logical status of all ethical statements” so that by extension “the question has been raised whether political philosophy is possible at all”.[[10]](#footnote-10) And equally Alfred Cobban, although claiming that a major problem with modern political theory is that it “has … become disengaged from political facts … on principle, as it has seldom if ever [has] been in the past”,[[11]](#footnote-11) also stressed the inadequacy of political theory that refused to analyze societies in moral and ethical term and instead claimed that human behaviour could be understood purely in terms of impersonal, unalterable laws.[[12]](#footnote-12) (The result, he felt, was that mankind was reduced to the status of “wretched individual atoms” with no control over their fates.[[13]](#footnote-13)) And even a more radical writer like Perry Anderson, although certainly blaming the general quiescence and apathy he detected in 1950s British society for the moribund nature of political theory, nevertheless still blamed contemporary philosophers for confirming this complacency by helping to deny political theory's essentially historical nature, hence neutering its critical function. For by denying the essential importance of historically bequeathed tensions within politics and society, as he argued many contemporary philosophers did, the need for political theorists to argue for particular courses of action was correspondingly undermined.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, this article argues that such a view of the nature of post-war political thought is mistaken, and for two main reasons. First, it fails to distinguish between the different forms that positivism took in the post-war era. Thus although it is true that in this period many theorists tended to claim that moral and political values could (or should) not be discussed rationally, their reasons for doing so in fact varied considerably, so that whereas some argued the case on a strictly theoretical basis, others did so much more practically. While some theorists justified their positions with arguments drawn from behaviourist social science or innovations made in linguistic philosophy, in other words, for others it was the perceived success of post-war welfare states or failure of (pre-war) political “ideology” that led them to reject the importance of traditional political theory. Second, following on from this, the paper maintains that delineating more accurately how positivism actually operated helps to explain why the way was left open for political theorists to pursue their discipline in a number of different normative directions - albeit that few reacted to *all* aspects of positivism. If some (such as Michael Oakeshott), reacted most strongly against the proposition that human behaviour can be understood purely causally, for example, others (such as Karl Popper) were more concerned to insist that political philosophy had something to say in practice. Moreover, some developments that were often damned for supporting positivism – in particular ordinary language philosophy – in fact had a much more ambiguous impact. For whilst initially it may have had the effect of helping positivism shrink the field of political theory by encouraging a myopic concentration on the linguistic analysis of particular moral and political concepts,[[15]](#footnote-15) arguably over the longer term, its effects were much more positive. In short, therefore, this article argues that whilst it may be true that no thinker in this period produced a series of normative arguments that were as systematic as those of Rawls, it is untrue to suggest that political theorists in Britain were unable to formulate normative arguments: they were simply more limited in scope than what came later.

1. **Contrasting Forms of Positivism**

If we turn, then, to examining exactly why British political theorists in this period were discouraged from putting forward normative arguments in favour of particular moral and political values, it becomes clear that there were essentially two different kinds of positivism doing so – one which was more practical, the other more theoretical. (To say this is not to imply that these forms were necessarily entirely different from one another either in terms of intellectual origin or in their effects, but it is to suggest that differentiating them is an important part of seeing the *ways* in whichpolitical theorists were discouraged from normative theorizing – and the opportunities that remained to them, depending on the form(s) of positivism they were confronting.) First, a number of thinkers in this period contended that there were good reasons to argue that systematic normative political argument should be eschewed because it had simply become outmoded, and was no longer practically relevant. They argued, in other words, that the era was (or ought to be) marked by the exhaustion of political ideologies, an attitude pithily summed up by the infamous title of a 1960 collection of essays by the American theorist Daniel Bell which spoke of an “end of ideology”.[[16]](#footnote-16) And they did so for several distinct reasons. In the first place, due to the experience of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the invasion of Hungary in 1956, coupled with a greater knowledge of Stalin's purges, theorists not only on the Right but also on the moderate Left became far less likely in the 1950s than they had before the Second World War to advocate Marxist ideology as the ideal way of modernizing Western society. In contrast to the 1930s, in other words, when the Soviet Union was often held up (by the Webbs and others) as an ideal model for modernizing Western society, in the 1950s, the increased knowledge of Stalin's purges, the experience of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the invasion of Hungary in 1956 often led theorists to take a much more critical approach to “official” Soviet Marxism.[[17]](#footnote-17) And this was reinforced, more theoretically, by the work of theorists such as Ralf Dahrendorf and C. A. R. Crosland which argued that not only was class less all-determining than Marx had argued, but also that “classes” themselves were less unified and more diverse than he had been willing to concede – so that rather than “class” being regarded as a theoretical given, instead it was something that needed further empirical exploration.[[18]](#footnote-18) Secondly, more generally, since acting in accordance with a consistent political ideology or utopian thinking in the 1930s seemed to have led directly to the appearance of concentration camps and “totalitarianism” - a concept much in vogue in the 1950s and 1960s – it was hardly surprising that political ideology in the post-war period became something viewed with considerable suspicion, and indeed became more or less equated with a form of self-deception. (This, for example, was certainly the view of many intellectuals – including such distinguished theorists as Raymond Aron - attending the famous Congress for Cultural Freedom conference on “Future of Freedom” in Milan in 1955.[[19]](#footnote-19)) What the experiences of the 1930s and the Second World War seemed to show, in other words, was that an over-rigid, over-rationalist adherence to the tenets of political ideology was an unwise denial of the limits of human reason – a conclusion that found expression in the renewed interest of both intellectuals and at least some of the public more generally in Christian belief in the 1950s.[[20]](#footnote-20) Finally, alongside these developments, and perhaps paradoxically, the experience of fighting Hitler in the Second World War, and the apparent success of the welfare state set up by the Attlee government in Britain also led to a suspicion of political ideologies, albeit for more positive reasons. The former seemed, at a stroke, to have solved a number of previously intractable problems in social and political theory, by providing the basis for a much longed-for social solidarity, to the extent that it was very common amongst political thinkers of both Left and Right to argue that the wartime state should – at least to some extent - be the model for the state in peacetime.[[21]](#footnote-21) And the latter, with its apparent achievements in decreasing poverty and unemployment, underpinned by the greater expertise that social scientists appeared to be exhibiting in the areas of economics and public policy, seemed to have found the formula – or at least the basis – for successful government, combining economic productivity with greater equality and social solidarity. In both cases, what seemed to have provided political answers was not a debate about political values, but rather practical solutions, buttressed by greater administrative competence and social scientific expertise.[[22]](#footnote-22) Given such developments, it is little wonder that adhering religiously to political ideologies, or even debating about them, seemed worthless indeed.

On a more theoretical level, political theorists faced the challenge of a different kind of positivism, where, as has been suggested already, the charge was not so much that discussion of normative political values was *useless*, but rather that it was *impossible*. There were essentially two versions of this argument, one founded on behaviourism, the other on an analysis of language. The behaviourist version argued straightforwardly that because human conduct could be understood on a purely causal basis, this eliminated the need for social and political theorists to discuss normative political arguments.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, there were relatively few full-blooded advocates of this kind of behaviourism amongst British theorists, especially compared to the situation in the U.S.A., where authors such as Harold Lasswell and David Easton were precisely insisting that it was the job of the theorist to offer impersonal and descriptive accounts of human behaviour, rather than getting tangled up in contestable normative political values.[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus one of the few who did seek to maintain a form of behaviourism was the influential philosopher A. J. Ayer, and what is notable about his position is his caution – particularly compared to his brasher American counterparts. For although Ayer spent considerable time and trouble trying to prove that agents' motives might well operate causally rather than through self-interpretation – hence removing an important objection to a causal account of human behaviour – he certainly did not claim this proved physiological determinism to be true once and for all. (Thus although Ayer insists that “there is nothing about human conduct that would entitle us to conclude *a priori* that it was in any way less lawlike than any other sort of natural process”, he is equally emphatic that “none of this settles the issue of determinism”.[[25]](#footnote-25)) This is not to say that behaviourism was completely without influence however, since although there were many strong objections to it,[[26]](#footnote-26) and particularly to its cruder versions, nevertheless a number of British theorists took up the challenge of seeing whether there was anything of value that could be gained from considering society and politics more causally. Thus, just to take one prominent example, W. J. M. Mackenzie, an influential professor of politics at Manchester University in the post-war period, maintained that the study of politics in Britain could benefit from engaging with the more “scientific” approach to politics propagated by the American behaviourists. For despite rejecting their reductive approach to politics, which sought to assimilate politics to the methodology of the physical sciences, Mackenzie nevertheless believed that politics as a discipline could benefit from a more social scientific approach which borrowed from disciplines such as biology, anthropology and psychology,[[27]](#footnote-27) not least because he believed this would allow political scientists to engage with the question of how power operated in British society, a topic which he felt had been often neglected.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Instead, it was the second form of this kind of positivism, often known as “linguistic positivism”, that was arguably more influential amongst British political theorists in this period, at least within a university environment. The point here was not so much to argue that due to the determined nature of men's behaviour, politics and society could only be satisfactorily analysed in causal terms, but rather to show that value-laden statements about human conduct could not be justified philosophically. The most influential proponent of this approach was T. D. Weldon, an Oxford philosopher, and his position – most notably put forward in *The Vocabulary of Politics* (1953), and the essay 'Political Principles' (1956) – essentially rested on two premises, one concerning how language operates, and the other about what made statements meaningful. First, Weldon maintained that much traditional political theory had been based upon a fundamental mistake concerning the nature of language, namely from “the primitive and generally unquestioned belief that words, and especially the words which normally occur in discussions about politics … have intrinsic or essential meanings which it is the aim of political philosophers to discover and explain”.[[29]](#footnote-29) Because political philosophers took it as read that words like “state” and “liberty” were simple reflections of unchanging concepts, in other words, Weldon argued, they had been mislead into thinking that it was their job to uncover the essential underlying meaning of such concepts – whereas in fact such concepts had no stable, essential meanings at all, but rather mere *uses* in practice that constantly changed.[[30]](#footnote-30) Since no philosophical technique could ever precisely establish what a given concept (such as liberty) was in the first place, in other words, according to Weldon, it was nonsensical to think that political philosophers would ever be in a position to advocate a particular conception of it as more praiseworthy and laudable than any other. Second, more straightforwardly, following the positivist tradition, Weldon argued that, to be meaningful, statements had to be either (potentially at least) empirically testable, or else self-evidently true. Unless it was utterly impossible to envisage a statement being otherwise, in other words – such as imagining space could have more than three dimensions, for example – it was essential, Weldon believed, that any statement should be (potentially) verifiable in practice, if we are to concede that it is meaningful.[[31]](#footnote-31) And according to this test, since value-laden statements necessarily fail, there can be no role for normative political theorists, because by definition such normative questions cannot be conclusively verified - so that ultimately any political principles that are held must ultimately be put down to the prejudices or emotions of the political philosopher concerned, since such principles necessarily have no cognitive status.[[32]](#footnote-32) In short, therefore, according to Weldon, since there was no way of testing normative political principles - and in fact no way, philosophically, of definitely establishing the identity of political concepts in any case - normative political philosophy was impossible.[[33]](#footnote-33)

1. **Reactions to the Positivist Challenge**

These, then, are the main forms of positivism that posed a challenge to normative political theory in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and, as we have seen, they assumed a variety of different forms. It is true that, to some extent, they reinforced one another. Thus, obviously if one believed that normative political theorizing had been proved to be philosophically impossible, this was likely to incline one to support solutions which appeared successful in practice – which in the post-war era in Western Europe tended to be those that increased spending on the welfare state, whilst shunning Marxism in theory, and Eastern bloc policies in practice. Conversely, if one supported the efforts being made in practice to improve the lot of individuals in society via state intervention, which were being pursued alongside a sustained increase in growth throughout Western Europe in this period, then one might very well conclude that there was little urgency in pursuing theoretical questions concerning the exact definitions of liberty and justice, since, practically at least, these had been satisfactorily solved for the foreseeable future.[[34]](#footnote-34) Nevertheless, that these forms of positivist argument were in fact supported by rather different premises is still important, since it helps to explain why normative argument still existed in these decades, and the different forms that they took. For although few thinkers in this period attacked *all* the positivist arguments against normative political theory being mounted at the same time, equally few of them (individually at least) went without being criticised by different theorists. Thus, as we will see below, theorists variously attacked the idea that philosophy has nothing to say practically about normative political choices, the idea that scientific method can be used to understand human behaviour satisfactorily, and the assumptions about language underlying Weldon's view that the whole of normative political theory had been based upon a mistake. Clearly in an article of this length, not all the important attempts to produce normative political theory in this period can be considered, and, in particular it makes no attempt to examine the work of many legal philosophers – and most notably of H. L. A. Hart - who sought to conceptualise concepts such as “obligation”, “punishment” and the “rule of law”, the normative components of which proved stubbornly difficult to eliminate.[[35]](#footnote-35) Instead, at the risk of being somewhat selective, it seeks to identify three especially significant responses, which sought take issue with the dictates of positivism in various ways, and to provide justifications for normative theory. First, we will consider Karl Popper’s attempt to advocate a conception of scientific method itself that suggests that positivists are wrong to suppose that no justification can be given for favouring an “open” individualist society over a “closed” collectivist one – since only in the former can scientific endeavour flourish, and more generally can humans be free. Second, we will examine Michael Oakeshott’s efforts to justify modern pluralism and individualism on the basis that this is the legacy that the Western European tradition has bequeathed us, and that to attempt to organise one’s society differently is to fail to respect the realities of modernity. Finally, we will look at the work of ordinary language philosophers, who sought to dispute aspects of Weldon’s linguistic positivism, and on this basis opened the way to making normative arguments about politics. For although initially the concentration on the exhaustive analysis of particular moral and political terms might seem to be highly limiting, implying only the more precise delineation of conventional usage, it is argued, in the hands of theorists such as Isaiah Berlin and John Gray it in fact ultimately opened the way to a sophisticated exploration of moral and political concepts that highlights their essentially contested, and necessarily normative status. In short, therefore, whilst none of these thinkers entirely escaped the limitations imposed by positivism, it would equally be a wild exaggeration to suggest they were completely unable to put forward significant normative arguments in the field of political theory.

First, therefore, if we examine the political thought of Karl Popper, most notably put forward in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957) and *The Open Society and its Enemies*, we discover that although he sought to maintain one important positivist tenet – namely that the same methodology should be used for studying both the natural and the social sciences – this does not prevent him from putting forward normative social and political arguments, since he strongly disputed the validity of other aspects of positivism. In particular, Popper puts forward two central arguments. In the first place, Popper argues that the very conditions necessary for scientists to work properly imply favouring a certain kind of society, since otherwise they would be unable to obtain genuine scientific knowledge successfully. This is because he believes, unlike the positivists, that scientific investigation does not simply begin with prejudice-free observation and experiment which in turn generate inductive generalizations, and then hypotheses about these phenomena which the scientist attempts to verify or disprove. Rather, Popper claims, the process begins with a scientific problem – usually a rebuff to a current theory – which demands a new theory, and then (critically) the deduction of hypotheses from this new theory that can be *falsified* (rather than *verified*) by observation and experiment.[[36]](#footnote-36) As such, Popper believes, the scientific community should consist of an “open society” of robust, free-thinking individuals in order to construct such hypotheses in the first place, and then to test them rigorously.[[37]](#footnote-37) And by extension he believes that societies will be unable to produce the kinds of (rigorously tested, piecemeal) plans for the future without an open society of individuals that is able to discuss, dispute, and even falsify such plans in practice; a closed uniform totalitarian society will be unable to do this.[[38]](#footnote-38) Secondly, Popper argues strongly against the alternative positivist theory that human behaviour should be understood as the outcome of entirely determined laws, arguing that this is to succumb to a form of *historicism* – namely the belief that human actions can be explained purely with reference to a set of impersonal social forces, which remain largely beyond the power of human individuals to analyze, or at least to affect. For although there are a number of different kinds of historicism, according to Popper, they all have in common the fact that they fail to respect the individuality and agency of individuals, by seeing them as at the mercy of social or natural forces.[[39]](#footnote-39) And on the basis of both of these arguments, Popper specifically seeks to dispute the idea that modern societies should attempt to formulate grand “utopian” plan for the future, contending instead that they should proceed far more modestly, using “piecemeal social engineering”. For since, Popper contends, it is an “historicist” mistake to believe that there is one single end to which society is necessarily tending towards, it follows that citizens with a society will never agree upon one overriding ideal to follow; the only way such an ideal can be imposed upon a society is by force. Equally, in any case, we lack the kind of knowledge appropriate for such a task – for since knowledge is gained through trial and error, through falsification, it is folly to try and implement a theoretical ideal formulated in advance; knowledge is something inherently piecemeal and practical.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Given these admonitions about historicism and “utopian social engineering”, how does Popper seek to formulate more positive social and political prescriptions in practice? Essentially, he seeks to develop his strong belief, inherent in all his arguments, that there is something profoundly wrong in trying to sacrifice other citizens' interests in the pursuit of realizing some grand social vision, ignoring simple suffering in the cause of a supposedly “higher” end. And from this belief, he derives two (related) normative commitments, first a Kantian commitment to the idea that modern human societies should be seen as consisting (potentially at least) of a set of self-conscious and reflective individuals, able to transcend irrational prejudices based upon mystical or merely traditional beliefs, and second a strong (negative utilitarian) commitment to the reduction of suffering wherever this is possible.[[41]](#footnote-41) In practice, according to Popper, this will imply advocating three positions in particular. In the first place, in accordance with his Kantian commitment to treating other citizens as “ends” - that “it must be the principle of all morality that no man should consider himself more valuable than any other person” - he argues in favour of a particular procedural conception of democracy, maintaining that if people are willing to set aside their visions of the good life, and their more grandiose theories about the social arrangements necessary to secure such visions, then a reasonable amount of consensus about the most urgent problems to be solved could be achieved. If people refuse to be misled by overambitious visions of what they can reasonably achieve, in other words – visions which are often fostered and encouraged by the pernicious influence of intellectuals, Popper thinks – then there is every possibility that sensible solutions to the problems that society faces can be achieved. Secondly, however, drawing on the more utilitarian side of his position, Popper also puts forward a more substantive set of normative arguments – which he presumably believes will accord with the “solutions” that free individual citizens will arrive at in practice. Arguing here that the way to maximize the happiness of individuals in society is to maximize their liberty, Popper here belies his reputation as a fervent advocate of the New Right, as someone who upholds the rights of the individual against the state at every turn. For although he certainly stresses the importance of democracy and its institutions in securing individual freedom, dismissing the Marxist charge that these are a mere sham,[[42]](#footnote-42) Popper nevertheless also believes that genuine freedom for individuals is impossible without considerable state intervention, since “unlimited freedom means that a strong man is free to bully one who is weak, and to rob him of his freedom”.[[43]](#footnote-43) Both in a political and an economic context, in other words, Popper believes, individuals have the right to have their liberties protected by the state against unscrupulous members of society, with the result that not merely should the state have the right to impose sanctions on those falling foul of the criminal law, but also to intervene in the workings of the free market to ensure that individuals are protected against the possible attempts of non-governmental economic bodies (such as monopolies and trusts) to exploit them.[[44]](#footnote-44) (Laissez-faire, by contrast, Popper argues, is insufficient, since it ignores the obvious imbalances in power that exist within the market.[[45]](#footnote-45)) And the solution, Popper thinks, is to “construct social institutions, enforced by the power of the state, for the protection of the economically weak from the economically strong”,[[46]](#footnote-46) arguing that in practice this will imply such legislation as limiting the working day, providing economic protection for individuals suffering from disability, unemployment and their old age, and guaranteeing citizens the right to work.[[47]](#footnote-47) Finally, Popper argues, more generally, although the best way to set an agenda for social and political improvement is through practical experience, through trial and error – since, as we have seen, otherwise Popper believes it is all too easy to fall into historicist delusion that history is inevitably proceeding in one direction – nevertheless there is still a (limited) role for social scientific generalization. According to such an argument, the social sciences have the job of discovering “the difficulties which stand in the way of social action” - in other words the “study … of the unwieldiness, the resilience or the brittleness of the social stuff, of its resistance to our attempts to mould it and to work with it”.[[48]](#footnote-48)Although Popper believes that practical experiment and “piecemeal social engineering” are normally by far the best ways of achieving genuine knowledge and progress within a society, even for him there remains an explicit, if tentative, role for theoretical generalizations – alongside a battery of more (supposedly) “practical” normative arguments.[[49]](#footnote-49)

If Popper differed from the positivists by disputing the idea that the application of scientific method to social and political problems necessarily rules out mounting normative arguments in this sphere, the approach advocated by Michael Oakeshott - the influential conservative political theorist who was Popper's colleague at the London School of Economics in the post-war period – in his essays from this period was significantly different.[[50]](#footnote-50) Like Popper, Oakeshott strongly reacted against the versions of positivism which maintained that the only meaningful way of studying human actions was to formulate verifiable hypotheses about them, let alone those that claimed human conduct was the product of fully determining causal laws. (For although it is true that Oakeshott left open the possibility – both in his early and later work - of analysing human conduct in terms of mechanical laws and quantifiable regularities, as well as in terms of motives and intentions, disclaiming any attempt to discover the ontological nature of human conduct, it is nevertheless clear that he regarded such modes of analysis as inferior to those that see it as the result of intelligent, rule-governed behaviour – favouring history in particular.[[51]](#footnote-51)) Where he differed from Popper, however, was in strongly disputing the idea that there was any similarity in the way in which the natural and the social sciences should be prosecuted, and in stressing the vital role of tradition and practical knowledge in making political decisions – in a ways that flatly contradicts Popper's position as well as the that of the “end of ideology” theorists. For if Popper's position differs from those of the more rigid advocates of post-war planning in positing (as we have seen) a more fallibilist method, nevertheless he continues to maintain that a community of self-conscious individuals will be able to solve political problems, in a way that Oakeshott would have found naïve – not least because Oakeshott would have objected to the very idea that political activity should be equated with that of “solving problems” in the first place.[[52]](#footnote-52)

For Oakeshott, what was fundamentally mistaken about such an approach, and that of the post-war planners more generally was their epistemological naivety. In practical terms, this led such theorists into upholding various absurd contentions about politics, not least the commonly held – if in his view utterly erroneous – idea that the perceived success of certain wartime domestic policies meant they should be continued in peacetime.[[53]](#footnote-53) But all such errors, he argued, were traceable to a faulty conception of knowledge, popular in this period, which claimed that all knowledge can be reduced to consciously formulated propositions which can be applied unproblematically in practice. This is the position that Oakeshott famously labelled as “rationalism”, and he argued that it was the direct consequence of the common modern suspicion of anything that could not be directly justified by reason, so that the rationalist is sceptical of “authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional customary or habitual”[[54]](#footnote-54) - although equally optimistic that all problems could be solved with the help of a mind that is “well-trained rather than … [well] educated”.[[55]](#footnote-55) Essentially, therefore, what the rationalist denies is the possibility that there is a form of knowledge that cannot be precisely formulated, that resists reduction to “rules, principles, directions [and] maxims”, which cannot be “learned from a book … repeated by rote, and applied mechanically”, and instead “exists only in use, is not reflective”, and can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired”.[[56]](#footnote-56) Oakeshott calls this “practical knowledge” - in contrast to the other kind which he labels “technical knowledge” - and, in sharp contrast to the rationalist, he insists that practical knowledge is always necessary for the successful performance of any kind of human activity; to claim otherwise is to be seriously mistaken. (Such knowledge, Oakeshott argues, consists in such things as the artistry a pianist gains at the same time as learning technique, the insight into positions a chess player gains as well as knowledge of the moves, and the judgment that a scientist acquires to show when his technique is leading him astray.[[57]](#footnote-57)) And indeed, as he develops his position in the 1950s, Oakeshott soon goes even further than this, crucially maintaining that not merely is technical knowledge *insufficient* to perform activities in practice properly, but that it is in fact *derived* from practical knowledge in the first place – so that technique can only ever be an inferior, broken down version of practical experience.[[58]](#footnote-58) Thus in politics, just as in any human activity, therefore, Oakeshott argues, human agents necessarily have to rely, on tradition and practical knowledge rather than on conscious design – to try and rely on such abstract entities as political principles, or political ideologies instead is not merely unwise, it is to make a fundamental philosophical mistake, by putting the cart before the horse. And as such, according to Oakeshott, it is hopelessly naïve to suggest – as both Popper and the positivists do, in their different ways – that political decision-making should be conceptualized as conscious “problem-solving”; to argue in this way is to put forward an entirely false picture of the way in which political activity is actually conducted.[[59]](#footnote-59)

This position certainly provides a powerful reason for Oakeshott to rebel against the behaviourist and verificationist forms of positivism. But it also simply seems to accede to the arguments of another brand of positivism – namely Weldon's claim that it is impossible to justify practical political courses of action with genuinely philosophical argument. Because political principles represent at best inadequate summaries of genuine political experience, in other words, and at worst the crudest of slogans, Oakeshott – no more than any hard-line Weldon-inspired positivist – seems to have no means of overcoming the gulf between political theory and political practice. It is thus little surprise that at least one (distinguished) commentator on Oakeshott, namely W. H. Greenleaf, has compared Oakeshott to Weldon for precisely this reason,[[60]](#footnote-60) or that, more generally, many commentators have interpreted Oakeshott as simply being an uncritical upholder of tradition, and traditional values.[[61]](#footnote-61) Did Oakeshott escape one form of positivism, merely to be trapped by another?

Judging by the development of his work in the 1950s, it seems clear that Oakeshott in fact accepted that the lack of foundation for normative prescription was a genuine problem that needed addressing. Essentially, he experimented with three solutions, before settling on the third. First, Oakeshott simply tried to argue that, since tradition, as he conceives it, is composed of a diversity of normative practices rather than being monolithic, he was not the uncritical upholder of (anti-modern) traditional values he was being painted. Because a wide variety of courses of action are sanctioned by tradition at any given point in time, in other words, it does not follow that we must automatically unthinkingly follow any one particular norm provided by it – this is to mistake the nature of what “tradition” means. Rather, through debate and discussions – through “conversation”, to use one of Oakeshott's favoured terms – political actors will decide which of the many courses of action on offer they will choose to take. Provided a tradition is sufficiently rich in terms of its experiences, therefore, there is no reason to suppose that it cannot generate a variety of normative suggestions about how we should act in the present.[[62]](#footnote-62)

However, if this argument was successful in rebutting the charge that Oakeshott was simply advocating the blind following of the latest norms thrown up by tradition, then it provided little help in justifying why we should follow *one* particular course of action. In view of this, Oakeshott in the 1940s and 1950s also occasionally flirted with a second argument, namely the possibility that the Western tradition as a whole had malfunctioned at some point due to the introduction of false rationalist tenets. Oakeshott sometimes suggested this had occurred in the Enlightenment (in 'Rationalism in Politics'), but sometimes raised the possibility that it had occurred even earlier during the first five centuries after the introduction of Christianity (in 'The Tower of Babel'). In common with a number of twentieth century critics of modernity, in other words, such as Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss and (more ambiguously) Hannah Arendt, therefore, in such essays Oakeshott seemed to be arguing that we can object to undesirable contemporary political developments by advocating a return to a point earlier in the tradition before it became corrupted, whether this be before the Enlightenment or even earlier.[[63]](#footnote-63) Such an argument certainly provided Oakeshott with a genuine normative platform to object to rationalism in modern life, but only at the cost of turning him into an advocate of strident anti-modernism. This was something that he was generally highly resistant to, being a strong advocate of pluralism, at both a philosophical and political level throughout his career – unlike the anti-modernists like Strauss, who tended to see modern pluralism as a consequence of mankind not being in harmony with natural law, so that they maintained there was one true way of understanding the world rather than a diversity of equally good ways of doing so.[[64]](#footnote-64) And so this was an option, therefore, that Oakeshott never showed much sign of embracing with enthusiasm – despite some commentators' valiant attempts to prove the contrary.[[65]](#footnote-65)

In view of his distaste for outright anti-modernism, therefore, in the later 1950s, Oakeshott increasingly gravitated towards a third solution to the problem of mounting genuinely normative political arguments, which was based on a revision of the way in which he conceptualised tradition. In particular, rather than continuing to conceptualise tradition purely philosophically as either something that exists as an inescapable background condition whenever agents act, or alternatively as something monolithic, as a single set of accumulated experiences that is capable of falling entirely into error, Oakeshott shifts to analysing it in more genuinely historical terms. Thus in such works as 'The Masses in Representative Democracy' (1957), *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* (1957), and ultimately, later, in the third part of *On Human Conduct* (1975), Oakeshott seeks to identify the most important trend in the Western European tradition, arguing that this consists of the gradual emergence of modern individualism in theory and practice from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards, and the associated loosening of the communal ties and self-identifications of the medieval period.[[66]](#footnote-66) For although this development has not been without its losses as well as its gains, Oakeshott concedes, the gradual rise of modern individualism nevertheless has offered human agents unprecedented opportunities for self-development and self-expression - opportunities that have been celebrated philosophically by a wide variety of theorists, including Montaigne, Hobbes, Spinoza and (above all) Kant.[[67]](#footnote-67) And as such, Oakeshott argues that it is the job of political theorists to devise ways to protect and encourage modern pluralist individualism, devoting considerable time and effort in the rest of his career to do this. Part of this programme consisted of continuing to object to rationalism in politics, to attempts to reduce the plurality of moral and political experiences to self-conscious moral and political rules and ideals – though now the reason given was that such an attempt would be bound to fail to respect the diversity of individual experience as it existed historically in modern Europe, rather than due to its being an epistemological mistake *per se*. But more positively, Oakeshott also sought to put forward proposals for a system of government that would both respect and foster such modern pluralism, stressing in such essays as 'On Being Conservative' – originally a lecture given in 1956 - that it was the proper business of governing to be “a specific and limited activity; not the management of an enterprise, but the rule of those engaged in a great diversity of self-chosen enterprises.”[[68]](#footnote-68) And if the full elaboration of Oakeshott's theory had to wait until the publication of *On Human Conduct* in 1975, where Oakeshott elaborated his political theory in considerably more detail, most notably with regard to what makes laws authoritative within a state, then nevertheless there is no doubt that many of the themes in that work were prefigured in his earlier essays. (In particular, the idea that a state respecting a plurality of individuals cannot aim to pursue a single overriding end was a theme that had already become central to Oakeshott's work in the 1950s.) Even in the case of the last solution, it is true, there remains a significant query as to whether Oakeshott has managed to overcome the positivists' reluctance to mount a genuinely philosophically based normative political argument, since his precise philosophical grounds for favouring his reading of the Western tradition remain inexplicit at best, and at worst just based on personal preference. But after all it should be remembered that, even today basing a normative political theory on a more “purely” philosophical basis – rather than a hermeneutic or historical one - is not necessarily to be regarded as a virtue.[[69]](#footnote-69) And equally, there seems little doubt that Oakeshott's work in the 1950s and 1960s was both highly stimulating and (in spite of the opinion of many commentators) genuinely normative in orientation.

Finally, there were also theorists, such as Isaiah Berlin and Peter Winch, who reacted against positivism in this period, but did so on a more abstractly philosophical basis, building on the increasing popularity of “ordinary language philosophy” in the 1950s and 1960s to criticize important aspects of the positivists' argument – taking aim in particular at behaviourism and Weldon's linguistic positivism. According to such theorists, building on the work of thinkers such as J. L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle (and ultimately the later Wittgenstein), it was a fundamental mistake to argue that the meaning of statements could ultimately always be found by breaking them into component words or symbols, which referred unproblematically to real or possible sense-data in the world, as such positivist thinkers as Ayer and the early Wittgenstein had argued.[[70]](#footnote-70) In particular, they argued, such positivist theories were mistaken because they were premised on the idea that one could only discover the meanings of words if one discovered what lay *behind* them, and that, moreover, there was necessarily one single *essential* meaning to find. Thus, not only was it a mistake to claim that one could explain the words expressing particular concepts by translating them into other terms,[[71]](#footnote-71) such theorists argued, it was also an error in any case to suppose that each word accorded neatly with one particular, discrete concept.[[72]](#footnote-72) Rather, such theorists argued, the meaning of different words and concepts can only be understood in the context within which they are being used, so that there is no, one, *essential* meaning – and indeed nothing *outside* the use of the concept at all – but rather simply a diversity of differing uses, regulated only by the conventions of ordinary usage. As such, they argued, the only effective way of investigating the meanings of words and concepts is to explore how they are used in practice, examining, as Austin famously did, what exactly different “performatives” mean in different situations and contexts.[[73]](#footnote-73) Thus as Berlin puts it, for example, in a classic statement of “ordinary language philosophy”, “words, mean, not by pinning down bit of reality, but by having a recognised use, i.e. when their users know how and in what situations to use them in order to communicate whatever they wish to communicate”.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Why were these developments important in the realm of political theory? After all, the claim that the positivists were mistaken in this way about the nature of language might seem a rather abstract basis upon which to base a critique of their arguments about politics – especially since Weldon himself, as we have seen, had tried to use just such an anti-essentialist argument to prove the worthlessness of political theory – an argument that was, furthermore, strongly influenced by ordinary language philosophy. Moreover, a wide variety of critics, both in this period and later, have argued that ordinary-language philosophy encouraged a highly conservative approach to politics, since it tended to suggest that not merely was language strongly governed by rules and conventions, but also – by extension – that human actions were in general. Thus they charged that, at best, such a theory allowed political theorists to investigate and amend such rules, simply perpetuated the positivist idea that human behaviour was entirely at the mercy of such rules, minimizing the role of conscious choice, since individual free will did not exist.[[75]](#footnote-75) (For example, Perry Anderson charged that “the effect of this doctrine was to extend a more or less undifferentiated affidavit to the conceptual status quo”,[[76]](#footnote-76) and Ernest Gellner famously argued in *Words and Things* that because ordinary language analysis only allows “moves within a pre-established language game”[[77]](#footnote-77) it meant that conservatism was inevitable, while, more radically Hannah Arendt saw the ordinary language philosophers' work as the culmination of the Western tradition's desire to deny the existence of the will.[[78]](#footnote-78)) But although such charges cannot be summarily dismissed, in fact the effect of ordinary-language philosophy was not simply to reinforce the validity of positivist tenets, or even to uphold more conservative political arguments.[[79]](#footnote-79) For in fact ordinary language philosophy not only offered political theorists the chance to dispute the viability of some key positivist tenets, but also, more positively, offered them more fruitful ways of thinking about political concepts.

First, on the more negative side, ordinary language philosophy offered a strong argument against full-blooded behaviourism. For despite the claims of some of its critics that it implied that human agents were entirely subject to the effects of external rules, in fact ordinary language philosophers were insistent that their argument that human conduct was “rule-governed” was very different from saying it was externally caused. Thus for Peter Winch in particular, the ability to apply rules intelligently necessarily implied some kind of reflective intelligence, rather than agents simply following rules blindly, or being purely mechanically caused.[[80]](#footnote-80) Just as one can only speak a language properly if one can react to different situations and contexts, in other words, Winch argues, since mechanically applying grammatical and syntactical rules will not be enough - so that (he implies) even computer-generated speaking programs will be insufficient – and exactly the same is true of action more generally.[[81]](#footnote-81) Furthermore, ordinary language philosophy offered a powerful reason to be sceptical of another key component of the positivists' argument, namely the idea that normative statements concerning ethics and politics were meaningless, since they were neither purely analytic statements, nor (potentially at least) verifiable by empirical testing. For since, as we have seen, according to the ordinary language philosophers, what made a statement meaningful was not that it referred to one essential sense-experience that lies *behind* the statement, but rather due to its place in one of a multiplicity of coherent language games, it clearly followed that the verification principle could not be used to eliminate certain statements as being meaningless. For because it cannot be said that there is any one set of statements that is more “fundamental” than any other, according to the ordinary language philosophers, trying to determine the meaningfulness of one statement by comparing it to a supposedly more “basic” one that allegedly refers to sense-experiences is to engage in a false test; rather – the ordinary language philosophers argued – one simply had to accept that there are simply a plurality of meaningful statements, the meaningfulness (or otherwise) of them justified only by the context and use. To argue otherwise, they maintain, is to sign up to the metaphysical fallacy that underlying our language there is some kind of “ultimate structure” that language attempts to reproduce.[[82]](#footnote-82) And this clearly left open the possibility that there could be genuinely meaningful normative statements about ethics and politics, since, as much as any other kinds of statement, these could be useful and comprehensible within the context of particular language games. This was particularly clearly argued in the work of Isaiah Berlin, who strongly argued that, precisely because we could not resolve normative questions on ethics and politics by determining a meaning for concepts like rights and justice and liberty once and for all, such questions resist investigation by purely empirical means. Instead, he argued, such questions had to be pursued philosophically rather than logically or empirically, and it was precisely the fact that these were questions where “no wide agreement exists on the meaning of some of the concepts involved”,[[83]](#footnote-83) that made such philosophical investigation necessary. For Berlin, in other words, it was the fact that such concepts could be meaningful in such a plurality of different ways, in such a multiplicity of different language-games that made normative political theory possible at all.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Ordinary language philosophy thus clearly offered powerful arguments to rebut some forms of positivism effectively, posing difficult questions for both full-blooded behaviourists and linguistic positivists like Weldon. At first sight, however, this might appear to be a rather negative achievement, since the implication of the ordinary language philosophers’ position seemed to be a relativistic or at best a conservative one, because it appeared to imply that agreement concerning key political concepts was simply impossible. But in fact ordinary language philosophy proved to be much more fruitful for political theorists than this, since it did not necessarily entail relativist conclusions – at least not of a radical kind. Rather, it tended to focus attention on precisely what makes disputes about moral and political concepts so intractable, particularly as compared to those used by natural scientists, and we can see a particularly striking example of this if we examine W. B. Gallie’s celebrated and influential lecture on ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, which was published in 1956.[[85]](#footnote-85) In this lecture, Gallie seeks to explain why certain concepts in the humanities were so open to endless dispute, examining “art”, “democracy” and “social justice” in particular, and came to the conclusion that there were essentially five main reasons for this. First, Gallie argued that an “essentially contested” concept had to be evaluative – that, as he put it, it “must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement”.[[86]](#footnote-86) Second, he maintains that, although recognizable as a whole, it must have “an internally complex character” in the sense that its characterization necessarily involves referring to several meaningful, yet contestable components that make up the concept as a whole.[[87]](#footnote-87) Third, Gallie argues that such an “essentially contested concept” must be “open”, in the sense of being “*initially* variously describable”, not least because the correct way of ordering the internal components of the concept is open to dispute.[[88]](#footnote-88) Fourth, Gallie also maintains that such a concept must be “open”, in the sense that it can be potentially modified in unpredictable ways in the light of changing circumstances, and fifth that users of such a concept recognize that their uses of it are in competition with other uses of the same concept – and that they have some appreciation and understanding of the different criteria that other users of the concept are using. To maintain their use of the concept, in other words, users must use it “both aggressively and defensively”.[[89]](#footnote-89) In addition, Gallie argues, in order to distinguish “essentially contested concepts” from those that are simply confused – in other words where parties are simply deceived in thinking they are using the same concept - it is necessary to posit two further conditions for them to be usable. In the first place, he maintains that, however contested they have become, such concepts must be derived “from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept”.[[90]](#footnote-90) And in the second place he maintains that it must be plausible that, if the contest over the concept is continued, this will enable “the original exemplar’s achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion”.[[91]](#footnote-91) To enable “essentially contested concepts” to be genuinely *contested*, in other words, Gallie argues, some original model of the concept, however hypothetical, must be posited.

In clarifying why normative moral and political concepts can be both highly contested, and yet still entirely meaningful, there is no doubt that Gallie provided theorists with both a powerful argument against positivism, and a fruitful way of investigating such concepts further. (Thus, just to take one influential example, William Connolly, in his book *The Terms of Political Discourse* [1974], builds upon Gallie’s analysis to argue that freedom is a concept that is irreducibly normative – and hence cannot be captured by the descriptive formula “With respect to B, A is free to do x”, because this is to leave out something intrinsic to freedom.[[92]](#footnote-92) And yet he also maintains that, although theorists differ radically over its definition, the concept of freedom can nevertheless be rationally debated on the basis that it always involves the sub-components of agents, constraints and acts – for, as he puts it, “our disagreements, important and profound as they are, are grounded in ... preliminary areas of partial agreement”.[[93]](#footnote-93)) Perhaps the best testament to this conclusion is the degree to which different kinds of theorist have been able to build fruitfully upon Gallie’s position, even when they disagree quite sharply with some of the detail of his arguments – most notably over whether Gallie’s theory is historically sensitive enough, and indeed over whether all his criteria are necessary for the essentially contestability thesis to work in the first place. We can see this if we briefly examine two important theorists who have respectively raised these queries concerning Gallie’s thesis, namely Terence Ball and John Gray. Thus for Ball, although the essential contestability thesis is certainly useful in emphasizing that, whilst certainly being meaningful, political discourse is an area where one can only hope for a certain degree of agreement over the concepts one is using,[[94]](#footnote-94) nevertheless it is inadequate in diagnosing precisely why this is so, since it fails to pay enough attention to the historical context within which such concepts are used and debated. For although Gallie is unquestionably right to stress that certain moral and political concepts may become “essentially contested” Ball argues, this is not because there is something peculiar that is intrinsic to such concepts; rather, it is a possibility that may or may not become actualized in particular historical situations, and one which tends to depend at least as much on changes in political circumstance as it does upon changes in philosophical climate.[[95]](#footnote-95) (Thus the ubiquitous disputes about the word “democracy”, for example, he points out, are of comparatively recent vintage, while heated arguments about the nature of “republicanism” that characterized 18th century political thought in both Britain and America have now largely disappeared.[[96]](#footnote-96)) And what this reveals, according to Ball, is that it is not so much particular moral and political concepts themselves that are “essentially contestable”, but rather a peculiarity about the nature of such discourse as a whole – it is an arena where precisely what *counts* as an important and relevant concept will itself shift and alter in response to contingent historical events. Thus precisely which political concepts emerge as being especially contested and worth disputing at a particular point in time, in other words, Ball argues, will depend at least as much on the immediate historical context, on the issues that are regarded as being especially critical, as it will on the nature of the concept itself. (To quote Ball himself, although “the language of political discourse is *essentially* contestable ... the concepts comprising any political language are [only] *contingently* contestable”.[[97]](#footnote-97)) And given that this is the case, according to Ball, rather than simply trying to analyze concepts that have become essentially contested on an ahistorical basis, as Gallie suggests, instead what we should seek to do is to examine how *in fact* such concepts have become contested historically, examining both how such concepts have been gradually altered through political practice, whilst at the same time showing how they have also importantly helped to shape it. For by helping to reveal their position within the network of concepts in which they are now being deployed, Ball argues, such critical conceptual histories can help enable us to see both the tensions and possibilities that currently exist within such “essentially contested concepts” – and hence arguably to deploy them more accurately and productively in contemporary normative argument about politics.[[98]](#footnote-98) Overall, however, despite the important differences between Ball and Gallie’s positions, the divergence between them should not be exaggerated: whilst Ball importantly differs from Gallie as to precisely why essentially contested political concepts occur, there is no question of his doubting either their existence or their significance.

In contrast to Ball’s position, John Gray’s attempt to reformulate Gallie’s arguments concerning essential contestability is more analytic in focus, concentrating less on the lack of an historical perspective, and more on what he sees as the inadequate way in which Gallie accounts for the very phenomenon itself. What Gray attempts to do, in other words, is to prove that, whilst highly stimulating, Gallie’s analysis of essential contestability needs rethinking because it in fact fails to define properly what makes concepts “essentially contestable” in the first place, leaving the idea at best underdeveloped, and at worst entirely vapid. To do this, Gray argues that neither of the main reasons Gallie puts forward to explain the essential contestability of some political concepts – namely their normative nature on the one hand, and their being “open-textured” on the other – are in fact necessary conditions for the phenomenon to occur. First, he argues that relying too heavily on the idea that certain political concepts (such as liberty and power) are essentially contestable because they are irreducibly normative is self-defeating. For, Gray argues, the problem with this is that if disputes over the rival uses of a normative concept can be settled by reason, it is hard to see why they are intractable enough to be *essentially* contested concepts – as opposed to merely contested ones - while conversely if there is no rational way of deciding between rival uses of a concept, then it becomes difficult to see how one can speak of any real contest occurring at all – the different uses simply become a matter of choice. So the essential contestability of certain concepts cannot simply be put down to their normative nature.[[99]](#footnote-99) But, second, Gray maintains, the existence of essentially contestable concepts also cannot be explained by Gallie’s contention that they are “open-textured” – in other words that they are initially variously describable, and can potentially alter in unpredictable ways in view of changing circumstances[[100]](#footnote-100) - because in fact it is quite possible to envisage essentially contested concepts that are not “open-textured” in this way. In particular, he suggests, one could certainly imagine a situation where there are rival taxonomic systems competing for a recognizably common subject-matter which has both considerable internal stability and clearly demarcated boundaries (and hence is not significantly “open-textured”) - and yet where the dispute between systems is not purely definitional, and hence the dispute is genuinely essentially contested.[[101]](#footnote-101) And so the essential contestability of concepts cannot be put down to their “open-textured” nature either. Thus while essentially contested concepts *may* be normative, and *may* be “open-textured”, according to Gray there is no necessity that they must be either.[[102]](#footnote-102)

Instead, Gray argues, there are three other factors that can help explain why certain concepts in the study of politics and society - such as “power”, “authority” and “freedom” - can become essentially contested. First, he argues that essentially contested concepts are characterized by what he calls “a peculiar sense of reflexivity”, so that the judgments made about such concepts are intimately related to the concepts themselves. Thus, just to take one example, one reason to identify “the political” as an essentially contested concept is that judgements about what counts as “political” are themselves political judgments – so that for instance when Marxists and liberals disagree over whether the organization of housework in advanced industrial societies has a political character, their disagreement ultimately hinges on what it is that makes a social practice “political”.[[103]](#footnote-103) Second, he suggests that specific uses of essentially contested concepts have an internal relationship to definite forms of social life, of which they may indeed be partly constitutive – so that, for example, what counts as “freedom” will certainly have to be understood with reference to the political structures and social practices of a given society, but also may have an important role in constructing and validating such structures and practices.[[104]](#footnote-104) Finally, perhaps most controversially, Gray suggests that differing use of essentially contested concepts depend upon opposed metaphysical commitments about mind and action and thus about the nature of human nature and society – so that, for example, it is hard to conceive of there being genuinely essentially contested concepts outside of a relatively open and pluralist society.[[105]](#footnote-105) Although he departs substantially from Gallie’s original arguments concerning “essential contestability” therefore, just as Ball does, Gray does so in a way that seeks to explore and refine the concept further – rather than reject it – and in a manner that is both highly stimulating and suggestive, albeit also deeply controversial.[[106]](#footnote-106)

**Conclusion**

What emerges from this article, then, is that the idea that positivism simply and uniformly killed off normative political theory in Britain in the immediate post-war period is a highly misleading one. Briefly, I have three conclusions. First, the forms that positivism took, and hence the reactions to them, were considerably more diverse than such a picture would suggest, so that thinking of “positivism” as being one uniform phenomenon is to present a false picture. (Thus although behaviourism, linguistic positivism and the “end of ideology” thesis *could* be mutually reinforcing, these articles demonstrate, in fact they were usually quite distinct types of argument, and it is a significant mistake to conflate them.) Second, following on from this, this article shows, the diversity of positivist argument meant that whilst few political theorists were able to reject the positivist paradigm entirely, a wide array of them were able to take issue with various *aspects* of the positivists’ account. Rather than finding the positivists’ arguments unassailable, in other words, normative political theorists in fact found it quite possible to dispute them in this period. (Thus some at least were perfectly willing to dispute the possibility of explaining human behaviour on a purely causal basis or object to the idea that moral prescriptions were meaningless because they could not be empirically verified or attack the notion that political ideology was irrelevant, depending on which argument was being presented.) Finally, to end on a negative note, none of this is to imply that the thinkers I have been discussing produced normative political theory that cannot be questioned. Thus Popper’s commitment to Kantianism arguably needs further justification, Oakeshott’s interpretation of the Western tradition as necessarily favouring individualism, and the linguistic emphasis of ordinary language philosophy can all certainly be queried. But since the precise foundations to be used to ground normative political theory today remain, to put it mildly, contested, raising such queries hardly constitutes a reason to label these theorists as inferior people in the history of British political philosophy necessarily; still less to claim that political theory in the 1950s and 1960s in Britain was dead.

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: MA, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Michael Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures 1958*, ed. S. R. Letwin (New Haven, 1993), and his ‘Introduction’ to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford, 1960), vii-lxvi; John Plamenatz, *Man and Society: A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx*, 2 vols. (London, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Wollheim, ‘Equality’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1955/6), 281-300; Isaiah Berlin, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ in: *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 1969), 118-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alan Ryan, 'John Rawls', in: *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1985), 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Brian Barry, ‘The Strange Death of Political Philosophy’, in: *Democracy, Power and Justice: Essays in Political Theory*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1991), i, 19, and also Brian Barry, ‘Introduction’, in: *Political Argument: A Reissue with a New Introduction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: CA, 1990), lxx, where he writes that “the difference that Rawls made in *A Theory of Justice* was that he raised the stakes in political philosophy to a quite new level ... [since it] represents a return to the grand manner of political philosophizing, complete with a theory of the human good, a moral psychology, a theory of the subject-matter (the ‘basic structure of society’) and the objects (the ‘primary goods’) of justice, and, of course, an immensely elaborate structure of argument in favour of a specific set of principles of justice.” Thus for Barry, “Rawls has made writing general treatments of political philosophy hard in much the same way as Beethoven made writing symphonies hard: much more is involved than before.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A particularly troubling (and systematic) argument that worried normative theorists working in the area of social policy in these decades was that put forward by Kenneth Arrow, usually called “Arrow’s impossibility theorem”. Thus in a celebrated article, ‘A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 58 (1950), 328-46 and subsequent book *Social Choice and Individual Values* (New Haven: CT, 1963), Arrow claimed that it was impossible to fulfil four highly plausible conditions, all at the same time, and hence impossible to formulate a reasonable normative position for the function of government, at least in this area. The first was “non-dictatorship” – namely that it should be possible to account for the wishes of multiple citizens, rather than just one. The second was one of universality – namely that it should be possible to obtain a complete (and not merely partial) ranking of citizens’ choices. The third condition was one of Pareto optimality – namely that if every individual citizen prefers a certain option to another, then so too must the ultimate preference order. The final condition was one of honouring the independence of irrelevant alternatives – namely that the final preference between two alternatives (x and y) must depend only on the individual preferences of x and y, and not on the ranking of irrelevant alternatives. (Arrow’s conditions alter slightly between the article and the book – those given here are the ones dating from 1963.) That it seemed to be impossible to resolve this conundrum was a cause of major worry to those social and political theorists aware of Arrow’s theorem, since it seemed to blow a hole in one of their major ambitions – namely the ability to provide a normative argument concerning what the state should do about social welfare. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Indeed, some commentators claimed that the demise of political theory in Britain occurred even earlier. Thus Philip Pettit argued that “from late in the [nineteenth] century to about the 1950s political philosophy ceased to be an active area of exploration ... There was lots done on the history of the subject ... But there was little or nothing of significance published in political philosophy itself”, while Richard Tuck claimed that “the period from 1870 to 1970 was a very strange one in the history of thinking about politics in the Anglo-American world (and, to a lesser extent, on the Continent also) ... [due to] the absence of major works on political philosophy ... between Sidgwick and Rawls”. (See Philip Pettit, ‘Introduction’, in: *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*,ed. Robert Goodin, Philip Pettit [Oxford, 1993], 8, and Richard Tuck, ‘The Contribution of History’ in: *Companion*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It should be noted, however, that there was little consensus as to who the final one had been – opinion differed fairly sharply as to whether Bernard Bosanquet, or Harold Laski, or R. G. Collingwood was the last. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Laslett, ‘Introduction’, in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society: A Collection*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford, 1956), vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Laslett, ‘Introduction’, ix. For more discussion of Laslett’s approach to political philosophy, see Petri Koikkalainen, ‘Peter Laslett and the Contested Concept of Political Philosophy, *History of Political Thought*, 30 (2009), 336-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alfred Cobban, ‘The Decline of Political Theory’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 68 (1953), 331 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cobban, ‘Decline’, 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cobban, ‘Decline’, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Perry Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, in: *English Questions* (London, 1992), 65-73, especially at 69-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As argued notably by Ernest Gellner – see his *Words and Things* (London, 1959), which caused a major (if now largely forgotten) storm amongst professional philosophers when it was published at the end of the 1950s. For an account of the affair, see Ved Mehta, ‘A Battle Against the Bewitchment of Our Intelligence’ in: *Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (London, 1963), 11-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge: MA, 2000). As Bell himself points out, however, the phrase was originally coined by Albert Camus in 1946. See Albert Camus, *Neither Victims, Nor Executioners* (New York, 1980), 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Obviously to say this is to identify a general trend, not a universal law. It is quite possible to find examples of thinkers in the 1930s who were sceptical of the USSR, most notably George Orwell; equally a number of European intellectuals, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and in Britain Eric Hobsbawm remained – albeit with some qualifications – pro-Soviet. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Both argued that Marx’s theory of class was too focused on property ownership at the expensive of other causes of inequality within modern capitalist (or post-capitalist) societies. See Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford: CA, 1959), C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1956), and Edmund Neill, ‘Varieties of Positivism in Western European Political Theory, c. 1945-70: An Introduction’ (above), footnote 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This emphatically did not imply, however, that there was any consensus over why following a particular political ideology was inadvisable amongst positivists and non-positivists, or even over how “totalitarianism” as a concept should be defined - see Neill, ‘Varieties of Positivism’ above, footnote 16. Aron’s own scepticism about the utility of political ideologies largely stemmed from his Weberian belief that reason could not help us to decide between value-laden choices, as Jan Werner Muller emphasizes – see Jan-Werner Muller, ‘On Fear and Freedom: On “Cold War Liberalism”’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 7 (2008), 53. (As such political ideologies generally just represented more developed versions of subjective individual preferences, as far as Aron was concerned, rather than being positions genuinely derived from human reason.) For more information on the conference itself, see Giles Scott-Smith, ‘The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the End of Ideology and the 1955 Milan Conference: “Defining the Parameters of Discourse”’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37 (2002), 437-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. There is thus *some* evidence that intellectuals found religion more palatable in this period than previously – as evidenced by the conversions of the philosophers Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach and Michael Dummett, and the novelists Muriel Spark, William Golding and (more ambiguously) Doris Lessing to Catholicism . (Furthermore, the [rarely remembered] success of Bishop Stephen Neill’s mission to Oxford University in 1947 – when mass conversions took place over five nights in the Sheldonian Theatre – provides at least some anecdotal evidence for the relative popularity of religion amongst the educated in this period: see Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch* [London, 2002], 249-50.) More widely amongst the public at large, although the evidence is somewhat ambiguous, religious observance did not seem to be declining rapidly, as it did by the 1970s.Thus, just to take one statistic, although infant baptisms per thousand declined from 672 in 1950 to 554 in 1960 within the Anglican church, confirmations per thousand actually rose from 279 in 1950 to 315 in 1960, as did the numbers taking communion and being ordained. At the very least there seemed to be some evidence that those attending the Anglican church were taking their observances more seriously. (For these statistics, see Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity, 1920-2000* [London, 2001], 444.) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Karl Mannheim was only the most famous example of an intellectual advocating this position in the aftermath of World War II. See Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (London, 1940), for example at 16, where he claims that “we have never had to set up and direct the entire system of nature as completely as we are forced to do today with society ... Mankind is tending more and more to regulate the whole of its social life”. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See, for a classic American statement of this position, S. M. Lipset, *Political Man* (London, 1960), 4 – where he claims that “the fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved: the workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship; the conservatives have accepted the welfare state; and the democratic left has recognised that an increase in over-all state power carries with it more dangers to freedom than solutions for economic problems”. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It is important to note that even given this premise, this position remains debatable, especially if theorists do not claim they have full knowledge of the laws necessary to explain current human behaviour. Thus, for example, it might be entirely reasonable to claim that all human conduct is ultimately caused, and yet maintain we still need normative political theory until we have a complete knowledge of how such laws operate. This is arguably why J S Mill, despite his aspiration to found a science of human behaviour in the *System of Logic*, book VI – ‘On the Logic of the Moral Sciences’ - nevertheless devoted considerable energy to putting forward normative arguments in such essays as *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism* and the *Considerations on Representative Government*. (See J. S. Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, 33 vols. (London, 1963-91), viii, 831-952, and J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and other essays*, ed. John Gray [Oxford, 1998]). For John Gray’s argument that this is the case, see his ‘Mill’s Conception of Happiness and the Theory of Individuality’ in: *J. S. Mill:* On Liberty *in Focus*, ed. John Gray, G. W. Smith (London, 1991), 190-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See David Easton, The Political System (New York, 1953) and Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society* (New Haven: CT, 1950) for influential examples. It is worth remarking that even in the United States, behaviourism, though clearly influential, did not carry all before it. See Terence Ball, ‘Discordant Voices: American Histories of Political Thought’ in: *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, ed. Dario Castiglione, Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge, 2001), 107-33, and Neill, ‘Varieties of Positivism’, above, footnote 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. A. J. Ayer, 'Man as a Subject for Science', in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Third Series*, ed. Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1967), 21, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. One of the most trenchant of these was Bernard Crick, *The American Science of Politics: its origins and conditions* (London, 1959) - especially at 213-48 - where Crick strongly attacked the idea that the study of politics could be based upon any prior conception of human behaviour external to politics itself – whether this be treating human conduct as comprehensible in terms of social processes, laws, or other facts concerning human psychology. See too Michael Kenny, ‘History and Dissent: Bernard Crick’s *The American Science of Politics*’, *American Political Science Review*, 100 (2006), 547-54, and, more widely, John G. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (University Park: PA, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See, for example, W. J. M. Mackenzie, *Politics and Social Science* (Harmondsworth, 1967), 301. For a useful article on Mackenzie’s place in the postwar development of political studies in Britain, see Michael Kenny, ‘The Case for Disciplinary History: Political Studies in the 1950s and 1960s’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6 (2004), 565-83, especially at 573-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Mackenzie, *Politics*, 217-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. T. D. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics* (Harmondsworth, 1953), 11-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Weldon, *Vocabulary*, 22, where he writes that “it is not the job of philosophy to provide new information about politics … or any other matters of fact. Philosophical problems are entirely second order problems.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See T. D. Weldon, ‘Political Principles’, in: *Philosophy*, ed. Laslett, 27-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. To be precise, Weldon wants to distinguish between questions of mere taste – such as whether or not we like peppermints – and those where rational argument is possible – as, for example, over secret ballots. But the reasons that can be given are not philosophical – “they are not the kind of reasons which Plato and his successors have believed to be both attainable and indispensable”. (See Weldon, *Vocabulary*, 13-4.) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Thus Weldon declares that the three aims of *The Vocabulary of Politics* to be “to show that the questions put by the traditional political philosophers are wrongly posed ... In the light of these discussions to show that the theoretical foundations of political thinking ... are all equally worthless ... To show that ... all that is discarded is some metaphysical lumber”. (See Weldon, *Vocabulary*, 14-5.) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See too Jose Harris, who in a now justly classic article emphasizes the lack of explicit input from moral philosophers in providing justifications for the welfare state after the collapse of Idealism – although she also stresses that Idealism retained its influence longer than many have allowed. As she points out, the lack of sophisticated intellectual support was perhaps less important when the welfare state appeared to be a self-evident success, but was much more significant later in the post-war period, when it came under sustained ideological challenge. See Jose Harris, ‘Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy’, *Past and Present*, 135 (1992), 116-41, especially at 136-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For Hart’s analyses, see H. L. A. Hart, ‘Are there any Natural Rights?’, *Philosophical Review*, 64 (1955), 175-91, and H. L. A. Hart, ‘Prolegomenon to the Principles of Punishment’, in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Second Series*, ed. Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1962), 158-82.Hart is of course best known as one of the most prominent advocates of legal positivism, but nevertheless there is still at least a minimal normative core at the heart of his concept of law. These consist of five components. First, he argues that human vulnerability implies that there should be a limit on the use of violence, second that approximate equality means that forms of government are essential in the absence of a natural superiority of some over others, third, that the presence of limited altruism makes it necessary for there to be some formalized and compulsory rules, fourth, that more or less permanent scarcity implies that property rules are necessary, and fifth, that, given human nature, legislation is necessary to prevent free riding within a society. (For these, see H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* [Oxford, 1961], 189-95.) Other examples of political theorists who took questions of political obligation, authority, and punishment seriously in this period – and found it equally difficult to avoid discussion of normative questions – include John Plamenatz, Hanna Pitkin, Richard Tuck and J. R. Lucas. See John Plamenatz, ‘Responsibility, Blame and Punishment’, in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Third Series*, ed. Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1967), 173-93; Hanna Pitkin, ‘Obligation and Consent’ and Richard Tuck, ‘Why is Authority such a Problem?’, both in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Fourth Series*, ed. Peter Laslett, W. G. Runciman, Quentin Skinner (Oxford, 1972), at 45-85 and 194-207; J. R. Lucas, *The Principles of Politics* (Oxford, 1966), 323-32 and passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The positivist picture of science is flawed for two reasons, Popper believes. First, it can never be the case that any hypothesis will be finally verified, once and for all, since one can never discount the possibility that one future counter-example will refute the original hypothesis. Thus the statement “all swans are white” makes sense if it is understood as a falsifiable hypothesis, but not as a finally verified statement – a point that was graphically illustrated by the discovery of Australian black swans. (For a succinct account of Popper’s theory of falsification, see *The Poverty of Historicism* [Abingdon, 2005], 120-5.) Second, Popper maintains, although it is correct to say that a new scientific problem may inspire the generation of new hypotheses, it is wrong to argue that this occurs due to scientists’ prejudice-free observations. For although, Popper declares – in his *Conjectures and Refutations* (London, 1972), 47 - “it is quite true that any particular hypothesis we choose will have been preceded by observations – the observations, for example, which it is destined to explain... [nevertheless] these observations, in their turn, presupposed the adoption of a frame of reference: a frame of expectations: a frame of theories.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Popper, *Poverty*, 143, where he insists that: “science, and more especially scientific progress are the results not of isolated efforts but of the *free competition of thought*. For science needs ever more competition between hypotheses and ever more rigorous tests. And the competing hypotheses need personal representation, as it were: they need advocates, they need a jury, and even a public ... Ultimately, progress depends very largely on political factors; on political institutions that safeguard freedom of thought: on democracy.” (Emphasis in the original.) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Popper, *Poverty*, 63-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. As Popper pithily puts it, satirizing Marx’s formulation in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, “the historicist can only *interpret* social development and aid it in various ways; his point, however, is that *nobody can change it*”. (See Popper, *Poverty*, 46, emphasis in the original.) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See especially Popper, *Poverty*, 76-85. Such a position obviously raises the question of how useful tradition can be in helping to formulate ways of acting in the future. Earlier in his career, Popper is fairly sceptical about the value of tradition in this context, but later expresses a more positive and nuanced view – see Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 120-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Obviously there are many different types of utilitarianism, not least because what precisely a utilitarian should “maximize” is contested, even amongst utilitarians themselves. Thus some would favour “pleasure”, others “needs”, and others again “well-being”, just to pick three prominent examples. By “negative utilitarian”, I mean that, firstly Popper is mainly concerned to minimize suffering, rather than achieve any particular normative end, and, secondly, that he does not advocate utilitarianism as a way of fostering societal “progress” in the way that J. S. Mill famously did. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Thus Popper insists that “what Marxists describe disparagingly as ‘mere formal freedom’ ... i.e. democracy, the right of the people to judge and to dismiss their government, is the only known device by which we can try to protect ourselves against the misuse of political power; it is the control of the rulers by the ruled”. See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 vols. (London, 1966), ii, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Popper, *Open Society*, ii, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Popper, *Open Society*, ii, 186, n. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. It should be noted, however, that Popper believes that considerable progress has already been made in restraining the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism – a fact he believes should inspire us to intervene further. See Popper, *Open Society*, ii, 187, where he declares that “since the day of Marx, democratic interventionism has made immense advances … and it should encourage us to believe that more can be done”. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Popper, *Open Society*, ii, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Popper, *Open Society*, ii, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Popper, *Open Society*, ii, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Thus, just to give one example, Popper believes that when trying to construct social institutions, it is important to have “some knowledge of social regularities which impose limitations upon what can be achieved by such institutions”. (See Popper, *Open Society*, i, 67.) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Originally written for a diversity of publications, particularly the *Cambridge Journal*, which Oakeshott himself edited, these essays were collected together in 1962, under the title *Rationalism in Politics*. See Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis, 1991). More generally, this section on Oakeshott borrows from my book on this thinker: see Edmund Neill, *Michael Oakeshott* (New York, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Thus in his late work, *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott argues that the “distinction between ‘goings-on’ identified as themselves exhibitions of intelligence and ‘goings-on’ which may be made intelligible but are not themselves intelligent, is not a distinction between mental and physical or between minds and bodies regarded as entities. It is a distinction within the engagement of understanding, a distinction between ‘sciences’ ... and the identities with which they are concerned.” - see Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975), 14-5. (Earlier in his career, notably in *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933), Oakeshott had also argued that the distinction between modes of understanding implied nothing about the ontological status of the phenomenon being understood, but there contrasted “Science” with the alternative modes “History” and “Practice”, rather than positing a prior distinction between scientific and non-scientific forms of understanding – for an explanation of Oakeshott’s earlier position, see Neill, *Oakeshott*, 17-31, especially at 20-4.) However, given the sheer amount of time Oakeshott devotes to specifying how we can investigate human actions in terms of intelligent “human conduct” – as opposed to causally – there seems little doubt as to which mode of analysis he prefers. Still worse, however, he believes, are the attempts of psychologists and sociologists to reduce human actions that are understood to be the result of intelligent choices to mental processes or sociological laws – for this is to conflate systematically two entirely discrete forms of analysis. (See Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 21-2.) [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. As we shall see, Oakeshott believes that the attempt to understand politics purely in terms of “solving problems” is mistaken, since it indicates an over reliance on the intellect, at the expense of the crucial role played by tradition and habit. See Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 27-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. By contrast, Oakeshott argues that a “teleocracy”, defined as “a government charged with a managerial task and responsibility” is desirable only in wartime; in peacetime, he argues, a “nomocracy” – defined as a common framework of rules that does not prescribe substantive outcomes, and “which conforms to a judicial analogy” - is what is required. See Michael Oakeshott, ‘The Conservative Opportunity’, in: *The Vocabulary of a Modern European State*, ed. Luke O’Sullivan (Exeter, 2008), 187; for Oakeshott’s most developed description of these two forms of government (subsequently labelled “enterprise” and “civil” association, respectively), see Oakeshott, ‘On the Civil Condition’, in: *On Human Conduct*, 108-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Oakeshott had essentially come to this position by the time he wrote the essays ‘Rational Conduct’ (1950), and ‘Political Education’ (1951) – collected in Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, at 99-131 and 43-69 – probably under the influence of Gilbert Ryle, and especially of his essay ‘Knowing How and Knowing That’ in: *The Concept of Mind* (London, 1949), 26-60. For some suggestive comments on Oakeshott’s changing position here, see Harwell Wells, ‘The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 55 (1994), 129-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. According to Oakeshott, this is so not least because of how closely related “practical” and “technical” knowledge are to one another – as far as he is concerned “practical” knowledge resists easy compartmentalization. Thus it is not the case, in other words, that one can distinguish between “practical” and “technical” knowledge by claiming the distinction corresponds to one between “means” and “ends”, or even that the difference is that technical knowledge tell us “what” to do, while practical knowledge tell us “how” to do it. For “even in the what … there lies already this dualism of technique and practice”, Oakeshott maintains - giving the illustration of a doctor's diagnosis as an example. (See Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 13-4.) [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See W. H. Greenleaf, ‘Idealism, Modern Philosophy and Politics’, in: *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of his Retirement*, ed. Preston King, B. C. Parekh (Cambridge, 1968), 93-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. This was a very common interpretation of Oakeshott’s work in the 1950s and 1960s. See, just for one influential example, see S. I. Benn and R. S. Peters, *Social Principles and the Democratic State* (London, 1959), 312-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. See, for example, Oakeshott’s reply to his critics in the version of ‘Political Education’ collected in *Rationalism in* *Politics and other essays*, labelled ‘The Pursuit of Intimations’ – see Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, 66-9. (Originally *Political Education* was published as a separate book in 1951.) [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. ‘Rationalism in Politics’ and ‘The Tower of Babel’ are to be found in Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, at 5-42 and 465-87, respectively. For Voegelin, Strauss, and Arendt’s arguments, see Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago, 1952), Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958). Arendt’s position is more ambiguous than that of the other two since, although she has distinct worries about the nature of the Western (philosophical) tradition, arguably this does not lead her to retreat into nostalgia. Rather, she believes that modernity still offers at least some possibilities for the best kind of human activity, namely genuine political action – as she highlights in *On Revolution* (London, 1963). And indeed, despite being traumatic, Arendt contends, the final breakdown of the Western philosophical tradition in the 20th century may in some ways make acting politically easier, though its corruption by technology remains a considerable danger. For a powerful work in favour of this reading of Arendt, see Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her political thought* (Cambridge, 1992); for a perceptive (albeit relatively brief) comparison of Arendt and Strauss, see Ronald Beiner, ‘Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: The Uncommenced Dialogue’, *Political Theory*, 18 (1990), 238-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See, for example, Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See Roy Tseng, *The Sceptical Idealist: Michael Oakeshott as a Critic of Enlightenment* (Thorveton, 2003) for a book-length argument in favour of Oakeshott being an anti-modernist; for a critique of this position see Edmund Neill, ‘Review of Roy Tseng, *The Sceptical Idealist*’, *English Historical Review*, 119 (2004), 1010-2. The prevalence of the interpretation can be shown by the degree to which even commentator who identify Oakeshott’s political thought as being that of a liberal nevertheless that he believes the post-Enlightenment Western political tradition to be suspect – for just one example of this, see John Gray, *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (New York, 1993), 40-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. See Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 365-6. ‘The Masses in Representative Democracy’ is included in the expanded edition of *Rationalism in Politics*, 363-83. See also Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics*, and Oakeshott, ‘On the Character of a Modern European State’ in: *On Human Conduct*, 185-326. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 366-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. There remains, in other words, a major question in political theory as to how universal its normative prescriptions can be – or, in other words, the degree to which it is possible to transcend traditional and cultural norms. Obviously the dispute between Rawls and the communitarians represents one version of this quarrel, but it reoccurs in many guises in contemporary political theory – the (prolonged) debate between Gadamer and Habermas is another example. For a way into the former dispute, see Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford, 1992); for an introduction to the latter see Alan How, *The Habermas-Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social: Back to Bedrock* (Aldershot, 1995), and the highly penetrating article by Paul Ricoeur – ‘Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology’, in: *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, 1981), 63-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. For a critique of this assumption, see J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, ed. G. J. Warnock (Oxford, 1962) and G. F. Paul, ‘Is there a Problem about Sense-Data?’, in: *Logic and Language: First Series*, ed. Anthony Flew (Oxford, 1951), 101-16.By contrast, for the early Wittgenstein’s view that “one name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group – like a *tableau vivant* – presents a state of affairs”, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears, B. F. McGuinness (London, 1961), proposition 4.0311, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. To quote Peter Strawson, an influential “ordinary language” philosopher: “Why should it be supposed that the only way to gain understanding of the words which express the philosophically puzzling concepts was to translate sentences in which they occurred into sentences in which they did not occur?” – see P. F. Strawson, ‘Construction and Analysis’, in: *The Revolution in Philosophy*, ed. A. J. Ayer, W. C. Kneale, G. A. Paul, D. F. Pears, P. F. Strawson, G. J. Warnock, R. A. Wollheim (London, 1956), 103-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Thus as Austin writes, strongly contesting this assumption in his *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson, G. J. Warnock (Oxford, 1970), 38: “why, if ‘one identical’ word is used, *must* there be ‘one identical’ object present which it denotes? Why should it not be the whole function of a word to denote many things? Why should words not be by nature ‘general’?” (Emphasis in original.) Thus, according to Wittgenstein, if we try and identify why we can use the same term – such as “game” – to describe different phenomena that all have something in common, this is not because there is one particular characteristic that all of them have in common; rather, when one actually looks, all one finds is a complicated network of similarities and relationships – a set of “family resemblances” as Wittgenstein famously puts it. (See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe [Oxford, 2001],sections 66-7, 27-8.) [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. It should be noted, however, that Austin differs somewhat from Wittgenstein here. If both agree that the meaning of words is ultimately to be explained by their use, and that language can perform a very wide number of activities, there is nevertheless in Austin’s work more of an aspiration to produce a comprehensive classification of how language operates in *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford, 1962). Wittgenstein, by contrast, was far more sceptical that any such classification could be attempted, since he laid more stress on the variability of language use in practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays,* ed. Henry Hardy (London, 1999), 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Whether this charge really does justice to the subtlety of the ordinary language philosophers’ analysis of the will is highly questionable, of course. See, for example, Gilbert Ryle, ‘The Will’, in: *Concept of Mind*, 61-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Gellner, *Words and Things*, 44. On a more popular level, ordinary language philosophy was also memorably satirised by Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller in a ‘Beyond the Fringe’ sketch in 1961. In the sketch, two highly mannered Oxford philosophers, named Bleaney and Urchfont , after a moment’s uncertainty about whether one of them has used the word yes “in an affirmative sense”, proceed to produce endless pseudo-analysis of word usage, before reaching the ludicrous conclusion that their analysis of the word “yes” might have been of use in defusing a dispute between a shop assistant and a customer that one of them had observed – although he had not, in the event, actually bothered to. For the sketch, see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVQrpok9KPA](about:blank). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy, 2 vols. (New York, 1978), ii, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. For a defence of ordinary language philosophy against the charge of conservatism, see Albert Wertheimer, ‘Is Ordinary Language Analysis Conservative?’, *Political Theory*, 4 (1976), 405-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. See Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London, 1958), 63, where he argues that actions made by humans without at least the *possibility* of reflection, “we are dealing not with meaningful behaviour but with something which is either mere response to stimuli or the manifestation of a habit which is really blind.” Although Winch in this context is in fact contrasting his view of “rule-following” from Oakeshott, interestingly some have suggested that his position here also differs from that of his main philosophical inspirer, namely Wittgenstein – since the latter does not stress the importance of reflection in following rules to the same extent. See, for example, John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge, 1981), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Winch did not address the issue himself, but the contention that human conduct could only be understood in terms of rules that are applied intelligently led to considerable dispute about whether computers were (or one day would be) able to imitate human actions and conversation. This debate really began in earnest when Alan Turing proposed that the best way to test whether a machine could behave in the same way as a human was not to ask whether it could “think”, but rather whether it could act in the same way as a human, or, more specifically, whether it could imitate human behaviour. This has become known as the “Turing test” – see A. M. Turing, ‘Computing Machinery and Intelligence’, *Mind*, 59 (1950), 433-60. The test has stimulated considerable philosophical discussion, but has been highly controversial – for just one particularly famous rejoinder, which has itself spawned an enormous literature, see John Searle’s case that the Turing test fails because it cannot distinguish between cases where a machine demonstrates genuine understanding, and where it simply manipulates the symbols correctly. (This is commonly known as the “Chinese room” thought experiment.) See John Searle, ‘Minds, Brains, and Programs’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3 (1980), 417-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. See, for example, Isaiah Berlin’s argument in the essay ‘Logical Translation’ that “where it is obvious that types of proposition or sentence cannot be ‘reduced’ or ‘translated’ into one another without torturing the language until what was conveyed idiomatically before can no longer be conveyed so fully or clearly ... in the artificial language constructed to conform to some imaginary criterion of a ‘logical perfection’, such attempts should be exposed as stemming from a false theory of meaning, accompanied by its equally counterfeit metaphysical counterpart – a view of the universe as possessing an ‘ultimate structure’, as being constructed out of ... pieces of ‘ultimate stuff’ which the ‘language’ is constructed to reproduce’.” See Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, 80. For a lucid exposition of Berlin’s position here, which clearly demonstrates the close relationship between his more abstractly philosophical work, and his later arguments about ethics and politics, see the excellent article by Jamie Reed, ‘From Logical Positivism to “Metaphysical Rationalism”: Isaiah Berlin on the “Fallacy of Reduction”’, *History of Political Thought*, 29 (2008), 109-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Isaiah Berlin, ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’, in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Second Series*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Berlin himself seeks to apply the conclusion that there cannot be an incontestable definition of certain ethical and political concepts very directly to political practice. In particular, he famously argues on this basis against a “positive” definition of liberty which identifies the latter concept with the ability to order one’s desires in accordance with an underlying “real” will (as opposed to a “negative” one which defines liberty in terms of an absence of external constraints). And this is because, according to Berlin, the problem with such a “positive” definition is that it *necessarily* commits one to the claim that liberty can be reconciled, once and for all, with other desirable moral and political values – such as justice and equality, for example. This is a claim that Berlin thinks is absolutely false. See Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002), 278-9 for his denial of this; for the famous essay on liberty, see ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in: *Liberty*, 166-217. (It should be said, of course, that the claim that advocating such a “positive” definition of liberty *necessarily* commits one to such a moral monism as Berlin maintains, is, at best, highly contestable.) [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. W. B. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’ in: *The Importance of Language*, ed. Max Black (Englewood Cliffs: NJ, 1962), 121-46. For other writers who drew attention to such concepts, see Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (New York, 1959), 230, where he highlights the fact that there are “some concepts that are permanently and essentially subject to question and dispute and are recognized to be at all times questionable”, and Alasdair MacIntrye, ‘The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts’, *Ethics*, 84 (1973/4), 1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, 125. The phrase “aggressively and defensively” comes from John Gray’s attempt to explain Gallie’s position: see John Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism and Essential Contestability’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 8 (1978), for example at 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Lexington: MA, 1974), 141 – Connolly is quoting Felix Oppenheim’s attempt at producing a value-free definition of liberty: see Felix Oppenheim, ‘“Facts” and “Values” in Politics’, *Political Theory*, 1 (1973), 56. For another highly influential work that emerged from thinking about essential contestability, see Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Atlantic Highlands: NJ, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Connolly, *Terms of Political Discourse*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Thus Ball argues that any ideal which is based upon the possibility of complete agreement and consensus amongst those engaging in political dialogue – such as Habermas’s “ideal speech situation” - is mistaken, because it fails to capture the vital importance of disagreement in virtually all political interaction. For although, Balls argues, “this discursive ideal is as old as Socratic dialogue ... by grasping the pole of anticipated consensus and playing down conceptual conflict one denatures political life and the language that makes that life both possible and necessary”. Rather, “disagreement, conceptual contestation, the omnipresent threat of communicative breakdown, and the possibility of conceptual change are, as it were, built into the very structure of political discourse”. See Terence Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse: Political Theory and Critical Conceptual History* (Oxford, 1988), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse*, 14. One such fundamental contemporary conceptual dispute about democracy concerns the question of whether it is a system which is designed to record the total set of individual voters’ preferences accurately, or whether it is one that aims at producing rational agreement. Both aims could be plausibly represented as being intrinsic to democracy, but equally could imply highly divergent courses of action, and methods of voting. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse*, 14. (Emphasis mine.) [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. On the possibilities offered by such “critical conceptual histories” – and indeed their necessary lack of complete normative neutrality - see Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse*, 14-7, especially at 17, and Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York, 1966), 2-3. The question of whether such “critical conceptual histories” are *sufficient* for the formulation of normative political arguments – or indeed whether there are any other options in any case – remains deeply controversial, of course. For one contemporary work that offers a way into this controversy, see David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory* (Cambridge: MA, 1994) for a fascinating debate between the two authors on this very question (amongst others). For what Ball’s projected “critical conceptual histories” would look like in practice, see *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. To quote Gray’s own definition: open-textured concepts are ones where “there is no finite and determinate set of necessary and sufficient conditions that license their application”. (See Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 393.) [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 392-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. A further problem with Gallie’s position, Gray argues, lies in his introduction of the idea of an “original exemplar” to the original five conditions that supposedly define essential contestability. It simply seems false, he argues, to claim that disputes about (for example) democracy require the disputants to have an original exemplar of democracy in mind as a common reference point – even if they do not think that referring to such an exemplar can automatically resolve the dispute. And, he maintains, the claim that constant competition between current opposing conceptions of the concept should have the effect of enabling “the original exemplar’s achievement to be sustained in an optimum fashion” is if anything even more damaging – since it strongly suggests that Gallie is committing himself to a form of essentialism, inimical to the original idea of essential contestability. (See Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 390-1.) [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 393-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. See, especially, Gray, ‘On Liberty, Liberalism’, 394-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)