The Ethics of Conceptualization

Tailoring Thought and Language to Need

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PART IV: ANSWERING THE AUTHORITY QUESTION

It is one thing to justify a thought on the basis of other thoughts—something else to justify thinking.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, 180

The responsible introduction or extension of terms, whether in philosophy or science, reflects a conceptual need.

Justus Buchler, *Nature and Judgment*, 108

Introduction: Appraising Concepts

While much philosophy strives to give us a firmer hold on our concepts, we sometimes also find ourselves questioning their hold on us: why should we place ourselves under their sway and grant them the authority to shape our thought and conduct?[1] The concepts we use render us sensitive to the reasons that guide and flow from their application. But what reasons do we have to heed those reasons in the first place? If our thoughts were cast in different terms, they would advert to different reasons, carry different implications, and set us on different trajectories. Concepts may be immutable, but our conceptualizations are not. By changing our conceptualizations—the ways of thinking and valuing in virtue of which we possess the concepts we do—we can change *which* concepts we use. Do the concepts we currently use merit the confidence with which we draw on them? What makes one concept better than another?

The question matters, because not every issue, in philosophy or elsewhere, consists simply in figuring out what is true or what is justified given the way we conceptualize things. Many issues are, at least in part, about how to conceptualize things—how to carve things up, how to characterize them, and what significance to attach to them. People can

[1] The question is significantly different from the Kantian, semantic concern to understand how concept application can be liable to assessments of correctness that Robert Brandom, drawing a *prima facie* similar chiastic contrast, sees as replacing the Cartesian, epistemological concern with whether our ideas are clear and distinct: 'For Kant the question is … how to understand [concepts'] grip on us: the conditions of the intelligibility of our being bound by conceptual norms' (2009, 33); see also Brandom (1994, 9–11; 2000, 80; 2002a, 22; 2019b, 9). My question is not *how any* concepts can bind us, but *why these* concepts rather than others should be allowed to.

form perfectly true and justified judgements and nonetheless attract criticism for the very terms in which they think.

Questioning the terms in which we think goes to the root of our thinking processes, for while the judgements we form might be criticized as false or unwarranted, these criticisms still take for granted the conceptual framework within which those judgements are articulated. By contrast, appraising the concepts we use goes one step further, asking whether things might not go better if we used different concepts that put alternative sets of judgements and patterns of justification within our reach. Adopting a concept opens up an entire new pattern of reasoning to us. Abandoning the concept closes it off. We might find mistakes in the way a computer executes the rules it operates by, or malfunctions in the way a smartphone runs its apps, but the deeper critique is the one that appraises the very rules the computer attempts to apply, or the very apps the smartphone seeks to run. Analogously, our conceptualizations can fruitfully be regarded as pieces of mindware, encoding certain ways of thinking by scripting appropriate patterns of thought.[2] To ask which concepts we should use is to ask what mindware society should run on.

It is this demand for reasons to cast our thoughts in certain terms rather than others that forms my topic in this book. The concepts we use determine what we recognize as a reason for what, but these tend to be reasons for belief and reasons for action. What about *reasons for concept use*? Are there reasons for us to conceptualize things in certain ways rather than others?

Reasons for concept use would have to be distinct from reasons for belief or reasons for action. They would have to be reasons to cultivate the dispositions to treat certain types of consideration *as* reasons for belief or reasons for action. Instead of *justifying* individual beliefs or actions directly, they would *vindicate* our confidence in certain concepts.[3] And instead of being *first-order* reasons operating at the same level as the

[2] I take the term 'mindware' from Clark (2013), though it also figures prominently in Nisbett (2015). A closely related metaphor is J. L. Balkin's (1998) notion of 'cultural software', which in turn echoes Clifford Geertz's notion of 'cultural templates' (1973a, 217–18).

[3] This distinction between justification and vindication is meant to be a technical one, inspired by the use that Feigl (1981b, a) and Williams (2002, 283n19) make of the term 'vindication'. It does not purport to align with the nuance in ordinary language whereby we reserve the term 'vindication' for

ordinary reasons our concepts advert to, they would be *second-order* reasons to use certain concepts and be responsive to the concomitant first-order reasons. In other words, reasons for concept use would be *reasons for reasons*.

Concepts alone are not, strictly speaking, reasons—the entire thoughts built from concepts are. But in discovering reasons to construct our thoughts using some concepts rather than others, we identify reasons to *treat* certain considerations *as* reasons. Speaking of 'reasons for reasons' is thus a useful shorthand. It highlights that what reasons for belief and action we are responsive to is a function of what concepts we use. If concepts are the building-blocks of thoughts, this makes them the building-blocks of reasons, and which building-blocks are available to reasoners determines which reasons they can respond to. This remains true even if one locates the reason-giving aspect of thoughts not in the *thinking* of them, but in *what is thought*—paradigmatically, in the *facts* one thinks about—since even facts remain conceptually articulated, and which facts can figure in our reasoning remains a function of our concepts. With the adoption or abandonment of one concept, an entire currency of reasons might enter or disappear from circulation. To demand reasons for reasons is to ask why one should trade in a given currency of reasons at all.

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Since our conceptual repertoire is a motley mixture of thinking techniques that vary widely in how they work and what purposes they serve, some concepts are more liable than others to invite demands for reasons to prefer them over alternatives. Among the concepts that are especially liable to do so are the concepts I shall focus on in this book, which are the concepts that unite the following three features: they are *world-guided*, meaning that their application is closely guided by how the world is rather than by our will; they are *action-guiding*, meaning that their applicability typically gives us reasons for action; and they are culturally *local* rather than universal, meaning that they compete with alternative concepts, real and imagined, for a role in shaping our lives.

Concepts combining these gradable features to any considerable degree are

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cases in which someone is cleared of blame or suspicion, or in which an agent's struggle to realize a goal results in an outcome that gives the agent reason to affirm the choices that led to the outcome. For a rich exploration of vindication in this latter sense, see Owen (Manuscript-b).

sometimes called 'thick' normative concepts.[4] The concepts *blasphemy, chivalry, saintliness,* or *lese-majesty* are examples; so, to take more recent additions to the conceptual repertoire, are *genocide*, *gaslighting*, *mansplaining*, or *himpathy*. These concepts are 'thick' because they are thickly descriptive—they have a higher descriptive content than thinner ones like *rational*, *good*, or *right* (if all one is told about *x* is that *x* was *disloyal* or *cowardly,* one still has a far more determinate idea of what *x* is and what happened than if told only that *x* was *bad* or *wrong*). But these concepts are also 'normative' in that they do more than describe or pick out things. As Bernard Williams notes, 'what your repertoire of thick concepts is reveals your own or your society's ethical attitude' (1995l, 237), because to think in terms of concepts like *kitsch*, *sacrilegious*, *chaste*, or *unpatriotic* is not just to be sensitive to the presence of things that fall under these concepts, but to cast these things in a certain evaluative light. That in turn makes a difference to what attitudes one has reason to adopt towards these things, and, ultimately, to what one has reason to do.

This action-guiding import of certain concepts is something we overlook if we appraise concepts merely according to whether they match up with an antecedently articulated world.[5] On Theodore Sider's account, for example, if a community has true and warranted beliefs but nonetheless has 'the wrong concepts', this must be because these concepts do not match the world's 'structure' (2011, 2). But Sider primarily has the concepts of fundamental physics in mind. One's willingness to extend this approach to thick normative concepts will depend on whether one regards the 'structure' corresponding to thick normative concepts as sufficiently independent of those concepts to form a robust basis for their appraisal.

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[4] The notion of a thick concept and the world-guided/action-guiding terminology is associated notably with Bernard Williams (1985, 143–45), who is indebted in this connection to Wittgensteinian ideas developed by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in a seminar they convened with Basil Mitchell in the early summer of 1954 (Williams 1985, 263n7), and with Clifford Geertz's (1973b, 6) advocacy of 'thick descriptions' in anthropology. Geertz in turn borrowed the phrase from Gilbert Ryle (2009c, 489; 2009d, 497). As Lipscomb (2021) indicates, G. E. M. Anscombe and R. M. Hare also played underappreciated roles in the renewal of interest in thick concepts.

[5] This dimension of evaluation is foregrounded notably in Hirsch (1993, 2013), Sider (2011), Cappelen (2013), Sawyer (2020c, a), and Campbell, O'Rourke, and Slater (2011). It also features prominently in Gupta (2019).

Irrespective of these metaphysical issues, however, there is a more basic reason to look beyond the referential dimension of concepts when appraising them: as Nietzsche notes, concepts do more than just turn the intellect into a pure mirror of the world.[6] There may be a sense in which concepts are 'representational devices', as the conceptual engineering literature tends to describe them; but if so, they do more than represent.[7] To take the full measure of a concept, we have to consider also what happens downstream of its application. What further reasons follow in the wake of the recognition that we have reasons to apply it? What does its applicability imply?[8] A concept remains an empty label to its users unless it 'locates its object in a space of implications', in Wilfrid Sellars's phrase.[9] If the concept *F* were like an app that pinged when and only when presented with an *F*, the ping would be devoid of any significance for us unless we could infer something from it.

A concept's merits therefore depend not just on whether anything corresponds to it in the world we inhabit, but also on what *follows* from its correct application, because that is what renders concepts, in the most literal sense, *consequential*: it is the primary way in which concepts make a difference to the rest of our thought and conduct. Two concepts

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[6] 'What if the intellect were a pure mirror? But concepts are more than that' (70:8[41]). I follow Richardson (2020) in citing Nietzsche's *Nachlass* by the last two digits of the year of the notebook in which the note occurs, followed by a colon, followed by the notebook number, followed by the note number in square brackets. Translations of Nietzsche's texts are my own throughout, though I have consulted translations where available, and amended them only to bring them closer to the original.

[7] A phrase popularized by Cappelen (2018, 3); in his usage, it allows for the fact that representational devices can act as expressive devices, however. But Mona Simion articulates the literature's focus on the representational dimension when she writes: 'Concepts, just like beliefs, are representational devices, their function is an epistemic one: to represent the world' (2018, 923).

[8] This two-faced model of the articulation of concepts that includes the consequences as well as the conditions of their application goes back to Michael Dummett's (1973, 434) generalization of Gerhard Gentzen's work on sentential connectives, and figures centrally in the work of conceptual role theorists and inferentialists (Peacocke 1992; Brandom 1994, 2000; Boghossian 2003; Wedgwood 2007; Brandom 2008; Kukla and Lance 2009). More recently, Jorem and Löhr (2022) have stressed the importance of consequences of concept application for conceptual engineering. I shall speak of 'application conditions' throughout, even though Gentzen's phrase, 'introduction rules', is more apt for concepts such as connectives.

[9] See Sellars (1958, §107).

that pick out the same set of objects, but associate it with radically different implications, are likely to differ also in their value to us.

Given my focus on how our patterns of reasoning are affected by our choices of concepts, I will put special emphasis on concepts' role in reasoning. But I do not mean to take sides in the debate between inferentialists and referentialists over whether the inferential pattern associated with a concept should be regarded as directly constitutive of a concept's content or only indirectly connected to it. Nothing I say presupposes that we *identify* the content of a concept with its inferential role. The thought is only that we should *also* consider a concept's inferential role, and not just its referent. This is a point widely registered in *dual content* theories, which propose, in a conciliatory spirit, to think of a concept as having both referential content, which determines the concept's extension, and inferential or cognitive content, which determines the concept's role in classification, reasoning, and the drawing of inferential consequences.[10] But all I require, really, is an assumption that each of these metasemantic theories can accommodate in its own way, namely that *which* concepts we actually possess systematically *co-varies* with the inferences we think we can appropriately draw.

Concept appraisal should accordingly be sensitive to the reason-giving as well as to the reason-guided aspects of concept use, because a concept's merits notably depend on what follows from its correct application. Certainly, it is only once we take these inferential consequences into account that we stand a chance of appreciating the effects concepts have even further downstream of their application, *via* their inferential consequences: the expressive functions they thereby discharge, for instance, or the needs they meet, or the concerns they promote.[11] A reasonably comprehensive picture of the respective merits of living by different concepts should encompass their wider impact on human affairs, and be sensitive to what concepts do for us *by* enabling us to refer to certain things.

This is especially true of thick normative concepts. For once people structure their affairs in terms of such world-guided concepts and become responsive to the action-

[10] See Marconi (1997) and Koch (2021) for notably ecumenical accounts that support this conclusion while accommodating both inferentialist and referentialist views within dual content theories.

[11] For a battery of arguments as to why we should look beyond reference when thinking about moral concepts, see Sinclair (2018).

guiding reasons they advert to, the concepts can end up closely dictating what people should do. Iris Murdoch evocatively calls this 'the siege of the individual by concepts' (2013, 31): if the applicability of those concepts is conclusively determined by empirical observation while their normative implications are non-negotiable because built into the concepts, this can leave one feeling beleaguered by the concepts one uses, bereft of any room to reasonably dispute that they apply or that their applicability has certain normative implications.[12] It is therefore with conceptualizations in terms of thick normative concepts that the mindware metaphor has most purchase—they really are codes of conduct, tightly linking certain worldly inputs to certain normative outputs.

The fact that thick normative concepts incontrovertibly link empirical conditions to normative consequences makes them effective tools of influence. This helps explain why authoritarian governments tend to take an interest not just in the conclusions their citizens reach, but also in the concepts they address questions with. It is, for instance, perennially tempting for authoritarian governments to promulgate thick conceptualizations of *legitimacy* such that, for citizens who live under those governments, the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn is that their government is legitimate. And this is but a particularly significant example of a wider phenomenon that has led a string of observers to note the political dimension of questions of conceptualization or definition: 'to choose a definition is to plead a cause' (Stevenson 1944, 210); 'disputes over appropriate definitions are thus political conflicts' (Sederberg 1984, 94); 'definitions are a form of advocacy' (Chesebro 1985, 14); 'the choice of definitions is always political' (Schiappa 2003, 68); 'definition is a political act' (Haslanger 2014, 33).[13]

Of course, the amount of influence achievable merely by disseminating certain concepts is easily overstated. Edward Bernays (1969) and other pioneers of propaganda

[12] Whether one accepts this of course depends on how one analyses thick concepts; see Roberts (2013), Väyrynen (2013), and Eklund (2017, 88–93, 168–91) for discussions of the various analyses on offer. I follow Williams (1985, 1995p, l, j, n, 2005g, 2021) in my understanding of thick concepts.

[13] 'Definitions' have variously been understood as being primarily of things (real definition), of words (nominal definition), or of concepts (conceptual definition): roughly, Aristotle prioritized real definition, Locke nominal definition, and Kant conceptual definition (Robinson 1954, 1–11; Cargile 1991). On any of these three emphases, however, definitions affect which concepts we use, thereby potentially carrying ethical and political significance; on this last point, see also McConnell-Ginet (2006) and Mühlebach (2019, 2021, 2022).

and public relations may have claimed to possess the power to 'engineer the consent of the governed', but engineering consent by tampering with the concepts people use has turned out to be a great deal harder than they initially made it sound.[14] Recent advances in digital technologies have rekindled concerns on this front, as they seem to make it unprecedentedly easy to shape how people think by filtering what they see.[15] But we should be wary of claims made about the power of these technologies by those who conceive of it in the starkly simplified manner of conspiracy theories, or who have an interest in exaggerating it. Overstating the power of elites to determine how people think is, after all, a hallmark of what Richard Hofstadter (2008) called 'the paranoid style' in politics.

It may also be felt that there is a more principled problem with this concept-centric picture of manipulation: that the beliefs people eventually arrive at remain significantly underdetermined by the concepts people employ. If the aim is to instil the belief that *x* is *F*, then promulgating concept *F* instead of directly instilling the target belief seems to leave open the possibility of coming to the opposite conclusion, namely that *x* is *not F*. To manipulate which concepts people use is to remain at one remove from their beliefs, leaving people just the degree of freedom they need to frustrate efforts at manipulation.

But although it is importantly true that what beliefs we form depends on more than just on what concepts we employ, it would also be implausible to deny concepts any influence on belief formation: we should reckon with the subtle effects of *framing*, whereby the terms in which an issue is framed help predetermine the judgements reached. The concept may not quite be the message, but it does shape it. As José Bermúdez (2021) has recently argued, such 'framing effects' are pervasive; and sensitivity to framing is not necessarily irrational: what concepts we frame our thoughts in can quite properly affect what reasons we take ourselves to have. Not all reframing is fraudulent relabelling.

Again, framing effects are particularly pronounced with thick normative concepts.

[14] For a historical overview of the birth of public relations and Bernays's role in it, see Tye (1998). On the use of propaganda to engineer consent, see Herman and Chomsky (1988), Handelman (2009), and MacLeod (2019).

[15] For a recent exploration of the idea that digital technologies can shape how we think by filtering what we see, see Susskind (2018).

Just because these concepts make normative issues turn on empirical observations that are hard to argue with, they are particularly effective at steering people more or less inexorably towards certain beliefs. As David Wiggins points out, the features of a situation can leave users of a thick concept 'nothing else to think' but that the concept applies, and hence nothing else to think but that its normative consequences apply with it.[16]

This means that the decisive work is often done already long before the moments of deliberation and choice, by what Murdoch calls the conceptually informed 'work of attention' (2013, 36). Becoming aware of those features of a situation that our concepts equip us to see continuously and imperceptibly 'builds up structures of value around us', with the effect that, when the time to consciously make a decision arrives, 'most of the business of choosing is already over', as Murdoch puts it; one is 'compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see' (2013, 36).

And yet thick normative concepts exert their subtle influence while giving concept-users the *impression* that they are freely making up their minds. That is why the power to channel attention towards certain features of a situation, or to frame an issue by casting it in certain terms, can be a particularly surreptitious form of power. 'When the concepts we are living by work badly', Mary Midgley observes, 'they don't usually drip audibly through the ceiling or swamp the kitchen floor. They just quietly distort and obstruct our thinking' (1996, 1). That inconspicuous influence can be exploited. Promulgating a certain thick conceptualization of legitimacy instead of trying to directly instil the belief that the government is legitimate *seems* to leave open the possibility of judging that the government is not legitimate. In fact, however, the concept might be so closely world-guided in its application that one is left with 'nothing else to think' but that the government is legitimate: it clearly meets all the criteria for the application of a concept *the point of which* is to ensure that this government should meet them.[17] The

[16] See Wiggins (1990, 66).

[17] On the challenges involved in implementing conceptual engineering, see Jorem (2021), Nimtz (2021), and Thomasson (2021). For a systematic discussion of the political dimension of conceptual engineering and the liberal and democratic rationales for making it challenging to implement, see Queloz and Bieber (2022); on the risk of conceptual engineering being abused, see also Marques (2020), Ball (2020), Shields (2021b), and Podosky (2021).

promulgation of certain thick normative concepts can thus be a camouflaged attempt to manipulate beliefs.

At the same time, thick normative concepts also tend to be sociohistorically distinctive and local, in the sense that different societies can differ radically in their repertoires of thick normative concepts. For any such concept, it is therefore a real question whether one needs to structure one's affairs in those terms at all. Just as we know that the smartphone could run an entirely different suite of apps, we know that we *could* think in different terms, since people have done and still do so.

This sense of alternatives, this hovering 'could', is more pronounced with thick normative concepts than with other concepts. *Thin* normative concepts, like *rational*, *good*, and *right*, for example, are far less world-guided in their application and may vary wildly in what they are concretely applied to; but at the level of the role they play in our reasoning, these thin concepts leave us less room for radical alternatives, since they seem to be concepts one is almost bound to gravitate towards by abstracting from the particulars of thicker judgements and generalizing over a variety of such judgements at once ('Are all of these different ways of going on *good*, or *right*, or *rational*?').[18] And *purely descriptive* concepts, such as those of elemental chemistry or particle physics, are even less prone to give rise to the sense that we might think radically differently. They are, on the contrary, particularly apt to invite the idea that the right set of concepts is the one that faithfully mirrors the structure of the natural world we inhabit—and that if there is only one such world, there is only one right set of corresponding concepts.

With thick normative concepts such as *chaste*, *sinful*, *chivalrous*, *courteous*, *snobbish*, *phoney*, *courageous*, *dishonourable*, *dignified*, *treasonous*, *rude*, *elegant*, *vulgar*, *kitsch*, *sublime*, or *creepy*, by contrast, the 'one world, one right set of concepts' model soon gives out. Though there is but one natural world, the social worlds we have lived in are many, and there are many more we could come to inhabit. To ask which thick ethical, political, legal,

[18] On the lack of alternatives to thin concepts and the process of abstraction by which one arrives at them, see Williams (1985, 162) and Grönert (2016); Smyth (2020) understands the shift towards thinner concepts as driven by the idea that thin concepts have logical priority over thick ones and are better suited to the articulation of all-things-considered judgements. But see also Eklund (2017) for a thorough discussion of the intelligibility of variation even among such thin concepts and its implications for moral realism.

cultural, and aesthetic concepts we should use is to ask which social world we want to live in. We may be more closely guided by how the world is in applying these concepts, but we have correspondingly more freedom *not* to cast our thoughts in these particular terms at all. Thick normative concepts thus do more to predetermine the run of things than thin or descriptive concepts, while being at the same time under more pressure to assert their place against alternatives. This combination of features ensures that the thick normative concepts that lend different social worlds their distinctive character render the question of their *authority* particularly apposite.

Murdoch also registers this when she adds, after highlighting the compelling force of 'what one *can* see': 'This does not imply that we are not free' (2013, 36). It implies, rather, that our freedom is exercised not only in the choices we make in view of what we *can* see, but also in our ability to determine *what* we can see. Hence the importance of making the effort to *look again*, which Murdoch illustrates with the mother-in-law who, upon realizing that her perception of her daughter-in-law as vulgar, undignified, noisy, and tiresomely juvenile may merely be a reflection of her own jealousy, puts in 'the work of attention', and discovers her daughter-in-law to be 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful' (2013, 17). We remain free to break old habits of thought and refocus our attention, not merely by redeploying it, but by redeploying it in different terms.[19] The freedom we have in determining how to live extends to the question of which among our concepts to apply.

At a deeper level, of course, what we can and cannot see depends not just on what concepts we apply, but on what set of concepts we live by. This is what invites the clichéd comparison of our conceptual architecture to a prison. To be imprisoned by concepts is not to be physically restrained by them, but to be limited by the fact that certain possibilities never occur to one (rather like Wittgenstein's man who finds himself imprisoned in a room because it never occurs to him that he must pull the door instead of pushing against it).[20] The concepts we possess lay down the boundaries of what makes

[19] Sher (2021) draws on Murdoch to defend what he calls the 'freedom of the mind' against morality's tendency to police thought. On the plasticity of our 'habits of thought' and how they can be either insufficiently or overly plastic, see Delacroix (2022, 5, 10, 59–88).

[20] See Wittgenstein (1978, III, §37).

sense to us. They can systematically blind us to certain conceptual connections and render alternative patterns of reasoning nigh-unintelligible. As Miranda Fricker points out, this can amount to a form of injustice—'hermeneutical injustice' (2007, 151)—when significant disadvantages result from a lack of certain conceptual resources, such as the concept of *sexual harassment*. But even when no injustice is immediately apparent, it is a classic philosophical trope to lament the unreflective mind's imprisonment in unreflected folkways.

Such conceptual confinement is not just a hazard of the unexamined life, moreover. Philosophers can find themselves locked in conceptual frameworks by their own theorizing. Joseph Raz speculates that this is a major factor in accounting for the dominance of certain views in philosophy. The reigning orthodoxy may owe its influence not to its superior capacity to win arguments according to shared standards, but to its capacity to blunt people's receptiveness to the force of rival views:

> Often in practical philosophy the dominance of one view is the result of its rivals ceasing to make sense. … Its correctness is manifest. Rival heterodox views are … condemned through their own unintelligibility. … It is mysterious how anyone might maintain such a view, unless they are blind to simple conceptual connections. To argue for the orthodox view can amount to no more than pointing out those connections. (Raz 1989, 5)

If Raz is right, the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between philosophical views can reflect the extent to which thinkers have become hostage to different conceptual frameworks. Philosophical debate then risks devolving into a deadlock, with each party reduced to reaffirming exactly the conceptual connections that their opponents reject as unintelligible. The only way forward, one might think, is to step back from the concepts dividing opinion, and seek common ground at the metaconceptual level, in the hope of finding independent reasons to embrace or eschew some of those ways of thinking whose adoption closes the mind to alternatives.

But we need not look as far as the gulfs between social worlds and rival philosophical systems for conceptual differences to start to matter. A small difference in a single conceptualization can snowball into a large difference in practice. This is what motivates Philip Pettit (1997) and Quentin Skinner (1998) to advocate a shift from conceptualizing liberty as *non-interference* to conceptualizing liberty as *non-domination*, for example. Liberty as non-interference is secured just as long as other people do not

interfere in one's affairs, while liberty as non-domination additionally requires that other people should not even possess the *capacity* to interfere in one's affairs on an arbitrary basis:[21] the Roman slave whose benevolent master never interferes in his affairs is still being dominated by his master—his *dominus*—who could shorten the leash at any moment.

This subtle difference in the conceptualization of liberty can spawn diametrically opposed views on any number of contemporary issues, such as how we should think about the large-scale harvesting of our personal data. If we conceptualize liberty in terms of non-interference, the harvesting of personal data does not count as a reason to think that our liberty is being undermined as long it does not interfere with the exercise of our will; but if we conceptualize liberty in terms of non-domination, the same data harvesting does count as a reason to think that our liberty is being undermined, since we whose data have been harvested depend on those who control the data not to use them against us. While the former conceptualization gives us no cause for alarm, the latter gives us every reason to protest.

The divergent ramifications of endorsing subtly different conceptualizations become particularly salient when we consider the requirements that our value concepts place on the design of new technologies. As a recent article in *Ethics and Information Technology* observes: 'Politicians and engineers are increasingly becoming aware that *values* are important in the development of *technological artefacts*. What is often overlooked', however, 'is that different *conceptualizations* of these abstract values lead to different design-requirements' (Veluwenkamp and van den Hoven 2023, 1). Demanding that new technologies be shaped to our values may be a start, but it still leaves all the work to be done: notably, the work of deciding which conceptualizations to shape the technology *to*.

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[21] This last qualification importantly allows that there can be interference without domination as long as the interference is non-arbitrary, i.e. constrained and justified. But it in turn invites the question whether this conceptualization of liberty blinds us to the real costs in freedom involved even in non-arbitrary interference—a point I address in Chapter 10; see also Lane (2018) and Cueni (manuscript-a). The potential impact of data-harvesting on liberal democracy is explored in Zuboff (2015, 2019), Nemitz (2018), Macnish and Galliott (2020), and Véliz (2020).

All of which brings us back to the question we started out from: what kinds of reasons are there for us to prefer certain conceptualizations and their correlative patterns of reasoning over others? A philosophical framework is required to help us to think about such reasons—for these are the reasons we need to identify in order to decide which concepts to adopt, adhere to, or abandon.

Ludwig Wittgenstein—another philosopher who was 'concerned that we should be in control of our concepts, not they of us' (Moore 2012, 278)—pointed out a fundamental difficulty in this connection: while criticizing or justifying a thought on the basis of other thoughts is one thing, criticizing or justifying a *way of thinking* is quite another.[22] In justifying one thought by another *within* a certain way of thinking, we take the concepts structuring that way of thinking for granted. Once we step back and attempt to justify that way of thinking itself, however, entirely different sorts of considerations appear to be called for. While the concepts we use evidently play a role in determining which reasons to think something true or justified we are sensitive to, concepts cannot themselves be true or justified the way judgements, propositions, or beliefs are. We therefore cannot model concept appraisal on the familiar business of assessing the veracity or warrant of individual judgements. We can give reasons *within* the practice of reasoning determined by the concepts we use, but it is a different challenge altogether to give reasons *for* a way of reasoning. Wittgenstein wondered whether it was even possible to 'give a reason for thinking as we do', or whether this would—incoherently—'require an answer outside the game of reasoning' (1979, §4). Can we give reasons for the way we reason? It can seem as if any such justification must presuppose what it is meant to justify if it is to be accessible to the addressee.

And yet we evidently do sometimes give reasons for or against certain ways of reasoning, and manage to think critically *about* concepts rather than with them. There must be a way to make philosophical sense of this fact. That is not just an explanatory demand, but an *ethical* demand. We need some way of determining whether our concepts

[22] See Wittgenstein (2005, 180); he puts it in terms of the activity of thinking as a whole, but the fundamental point—that very different types of considerations are called for once one goes beyond justifying one thought on the basis of another within a certain way of thinking—holds in either case. I explore this theme in his work in Queloz (2016, 2017b). A related distinction is drawn by Toulmin (1953, ch. 11) and Rawls (1955).

are helping us to live—whether we are using concepts that express and subserve our concerns, or whether we are, as Nietzsche feared, 'stuck in a cage, imprisoned among all sorts of terrible concepts' (2005c, Improvers, §2). But how do we tell the difference? How can we critically ascertain that the building-blocks of our thoughts are not stumbling-blocks to our concerns?

My aim in this book is to develop a framework for concept appraisal. At the heart of this framework are *reasons for concept use*, a special class of reasons that are orthogonal to, and yet can underpin or undermine, the reasons for action and belief that figure in our deliberations. To adopt a concept is to become sensitive to the reasons that immediately guide and flow from its application. But we can go one step further and ask for reasons to reason in these terms. This is to demand reasons for reasons—second-order reasons to use the concept and be responsive to its concomitant first-order reasons: the reasons to apply the concept as well as the reasons that follow from its applicability.

As Wittgenstein's puzzlement reminds us, it is a remarkable fact that we can give and ask for reasons for the way we reason *from within* our practices of reason-giving. This is the accomplishment of the concept of a second-order reason: it makes it possible to subject to critical scrutiny the very concepts and first-order reasons that make up the conceptual architecture we inhabit. By acquiring the ability to think in terms of reasons for reasons, we become able to sound out and renovate the house of reason from within.

Pursuing the question of how best to do this will lead us deep into the *ethics of conceptualization*: the practical reflection on which concepts we should be disposed to use. Concepts, at least if understood as the abstract objects forming the constituents of thought, may not be the sort of thing one can change. In line with this, many philosophers think of concepts as timeless, immutable, and unimprovable abstracta, rather as the ancient Greeks thought of the stars: denizens of a celestial sphere that is eternal, unaffected by terrestrial change, and already perfect and complete as it is.

But there is still a practical question about *which* concepts we look to in guiding and organizing our affairs. And we *can* change which concepts we use by changing our *conceptualizations*—the bundles of dispositions that characterize our ways of thinking and valuing (about which more at the end of Chapter 2). I take practical reflection on which concepts to use to be at the heart of what Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett have labelled 'conceptual ethics', the somewhat more capaciously defined enterprise of

pursuing normative and evaluative questions about concepts, words, and other broadly 'representational' or 'inferential' devices we use in thought and talk.[23] So even when I resort to the pithier phrase 'conceptual ethics', what I shall mean by it is, specifically, the ethics of conceptualization (in contrast also to the *morality* of conceptualization, as we shall see in Chapter 8).

By changing our conceptualizations, moreover, we also change which linguistic meanings are associated with the words we use.[24] If words get their meanings from expressing concepts, then changing *which* concept a word expresses changes the meaning of the word; and if the meaning of the word changes, then the way the word is used will change accordingly. When the Romantics, for example, broke with the Enlightenment conceptualization of nature as a mere machine to be figured out, and reconceptualized nature as something infused with value and dignity in its own right, they held on to the word 'nature', but changed its meaning and use. Changing word-meaning pairings by changing how we think promises to avoid many of the difficulties afflicting the opposite strategy, of changing how we think by changing how we speak.[25] The conceptualizations through which we come to grasp and master concepts are what *underlies* our ability to use and interpret words correctly. Mastery of a concept underpins and at least paradigmatically manifests itself in mastery of the use of a linguistic expression. Thus, Wittgenstein observes that when he thinks of a concept, he thinks of 'the technique of our use of an expression: as it were, the railway network that we have built for it' (MS 163, 57r). Robert Brandom likewise endorses the Sellarsian slogan that 'grasping a

[23] For characterizations of conceptual ethics, see Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, b, 2020) and Cappelen and Plunkett (2020). Recent contributions congenial to the approach pursued here include Miller (2010), Plunkett (2015, 2016), Fredericks (2018, 2020), Wille (2018), Goetze (2018, 2021), Koch (2019, 2021), Latham, Miller, and Norton (2019), Haslanger (2014, 2020a), Thomasson (2020b, 2022), Isaac (2021), McPherson (2020b, 49–52), McPherson and Plunkett (2020, 2021), Nado (2021), Smithson (2021), Shields (2021a, c, b, 2023), Lau (2022), Jorem (2022), Jorem and Löhr (2022), and Santarelli (2022). An earlier manifesto for this type of philosophical inquiry is formulated by Carruthers (1987). Congenial contributions from neighbouring disciplines also include Schiappa (2003), who offers rhetorical-cum-philosophical analyses of several case studies to illustrate the politics of definitions, and Abend (2023), who tackles debates over definition and conceptualization in social science from a sociological perspective.

[24] For different accounts of this, see Sawyer (2020c) and Koch (2021).

[25] See Gleitman and Papafragou (2012) and Mühlebach (2022).

concept is mastering the use of a word' (2015b, 102).

But there are good reasons not to *identify* concepts with words, nor to attribute concepts to others solely on the basis of their lexicon—as Bruno Snell's 'lexical principle' invites us to do, for instance, maintaining that something does not become 'an object of thought' until it is 'seen and known and designated by a word' (1953, 7). Similarly, we should be careful in adopting the methodological precept of using words as proxies for concepts—an approach sometimes adopted by historians of ideas to render their material manageable (Skinner 2009, 325). This can easily end up blurring the distinction between words and concepts just as much as the lexical principle does. Yet concepts are not just the shadows of words, and words make imperfect proxies for concepts. How else could we appreciate the challenges involved in putting a thought into words vividly brought out by Eli Alshanetsky's *Articulating a Thought* (2019)? Our thinking techniques are one thing, our ways of expressing and conveying these techniques through language another.[26] Nevertheless, the two are interdependent in various ways, and reflection on which concepts to use should underlie and inform reflection on how to speak, which words and expressions to adopt, adhere to, or abandon, and what meanings to attach to them. There are, as Sellars stressed, 'an indefinite number of possible conceptual structures [that] must compete in the market place of practice for employment by language users' (2007, 26).

Though it is now in the ascendant, reflection on which concepts to use is not new. Philosophers have long been in thrall to the thought that when we are being rigorous in our reasoning, we should not listen to any old reason flowing from any old concept, but should probe how far the reasons suggested by our concepts can be shored up by reasons validating the rational authority of these concepts.[27] That is part of what it means to reason for oneself rather than rely on guidance from elsewhere, and hence part of what marks the difference between rational autonomy and rational tutelage that forms the

[26] For a battery of arguments as to why it is a mistake to identify language too closely with thought, see Sawyer (2020b) and Rieland (2022).

[27] Intimations of that ideal can be gleaned already from Plato's insistence, in the *Theaetetus* (201c–210d), that a claim needs a *logos* (a reason) to count as knowledge, and from his call, in the *Protagoras* (356d–e), to turn practical reasoning into a *techne*—a 'science' or 'measurement system'—that promises to shelter people from *tyche*, the unpredictable play of fortune, by giving them more control over whether their lives go well. See Nussbaum (2001, ch. 4).

defining contrast of the Enlightenment according to Immanuel Kant. [28] Islamic philosophy draws a related contrast between *taqlīd*, the uncritical acceptance of authority, and *ijtihād*, judgment based on independent effort.[29] We should not use a concept merely out of awe, or merely out of habit—intuition should be grounded in argument, suggestiveness in discursiveness. As Kant insisted, we should query *by what right* our concepts tell us how to think.[30] This expresses more than the aspiration to be governed by the authority of ideas rather than by the idea of authority.[31] It encourages us to be critical of *which* ideas we let ourselves be governed by.

Although this demand that one should be able to offer reasons for using the concepts one uses received its purest expression in Enlightenment rationalism, we continue to recognize the interlocutor who greets justifications such as 'Because it is a *human being*' with: 'So what?'; or 'Because it is *natural*' with: 'Why does that give me a reason?' This is not to question the *applicability* of the concept *human being* or the concept *natural*; it is to question the *authority* of these concepts—to ask for reasons to treat the considerations articulated in terms of these concepts as giving one reasons. Of course, an individual concept is too small a unit to constitute or give one reasons by itself; only complete thoughts give one reasons: the thought *that* something is a human being, or *that* something is natural. But these thoughts are articulated in terms of particular concepts, and whether we can be sensitive to the considerations presented in these thoughts depends notably on which concepts we possess.

This is why entire cultural revolutions can be sparked by reconceptualizations. Think

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[28] In his essay '*Was ist Aufklärung?*', Kant defines Enlightenment as humanity's emergence from its self-imposed tutelage, and characterizes 'tutelage' or *Unmündigkeit* as the inability to use one's own reason without another's guidance (1900–, WA, AA 08: 35.1–3).

[29] See Adamson (2022).

[30] Kant's transcendental deduction of the pure categories of the understanding (A84–130/B116–169), which he offers in answer to this '*Quid juris?*'-question, is perhaps the most venerable example of an attempt to formulate reasons by which to ground the legitimacy of concepts—Christine Korsgaard consciously echoes Kant's question in *The Sources of Normativity* when she asks after 'the right of these concepts to give laws to us' (1996, 9). By Kant's own lights, however, the strategy of transcendental deduction is available only for a handful of special concepts—the categories—and cannot be generalized to the sociohistorically local and thick normative concepts I focus on here.

[31] A contrast drawn by Summers (2003, 144) in characterizing the ideal of the university.

of how the writings of Grotius, Hobbes, and Pufendorf helped precipitate the cultural shift from conceptualizing legitimacy in terms of divine authority to conceptualizing it in terms of consent;[32] or, indeed, of the rise of environmental thought made possible by the Romantic reconceptualization of nature.[33] Once that new way of thinking had taken hold, the consideration that something was 'natural' became intelligible, in a way it had not been before, as a reason in its own right. A new currency of reasons had been introduced. And when people challenge this currency of reasons, as they continue to do to this day, the challenge is not merely one to the authority of particular thoughts ('Is it *true* that this is natural?'). The challenge is to the authority of the very concept of nature in terms of which these thoughts are articulated: why should one *think* of what is natural as infused with value and dignity in its own right? This is to demand reasons for reasons: reasons to reason in terms of a certain concept and heed the reasons it adverts to.

Traditionally, such reasons for reasons have been sought in timeless and mind-independent rational foundations capable of authenticating one set of concepts as absolutely best: the concepts corresponding to Platonic Forms or the Mind of God, perhaps, or the concepts dictated by natural law or universal reason. Indeed, the normative expectation that one should be able to offer reasons for reasons may itself have been one of the main drivers towards such foundationalist theories.[34] Reflecting on the enduring attraction of such theories towards the end of a career spent attacking them, Bernard Williams surmises that the most powerful driver towards foundationalist theory is 'this idea that you *must* give a reason for a reason', especially when applied to the authority rather than the truth of a consideration: 'If I say: But it's an *animal*, they say: Why is that a reason? I've got to give a reason for that reason, in the end. That's why I end up with foundations' (1999, 251, emphasis added). What is being demanded is not a reason to count something *as an animal*, but a reason to count its being an animal *as a reason* for or against something else. So instead of being asked to point out particular features of something that justify the application of the concept *animal* to it, we are being asked to give more general reasons to recognize the authority of an entire way of thinking.

[32] See Schneewind (1998).

[33] See Rigby (2023).

[34] As comes out in Radzik's (2000) discussion of different foundationalist theories of normative authority, for example.

That line of inquiry naturally encourages a search for ever more fundamental grounds on which to validate certain concepts as authoritative, until one reaches rational foundations capable of authenticating one set of concepts as the one that a rational thinker should use.

When disappointed, however, this expectation that one should be able to anchor the reasons one responds to in rational foundations has corrosive effects. Any concepts deprived of such anchoring are demoted to mere conceits, to be cast aside by the rational thinker. And if the conclusion reached is that there are in fact no such timeless and mind-independent rational foundations to be had—at least not widely enough to support a *generalized* foundationalism—the same expectation that we should be able to anchor the set of truly authoritative concepts in such foundations creates a sense that something crucial is *lacking*, resulting in alienation from our concepts. Absent timeless and mind-independent rational foundations, the realization that there are other concepts we could use, and that there is no neutrally identifiable reason to prefer the concepts we happen to have over alternatives, encourages indiscriminate disengagement from all our concepts.

Attempts to reconcile a reflective sense of the contingency of our using the concepts we use with full-blooded confidence in those concepts have tended to err in the opposite direction and license the undiscriminating *acceptance* of whichever concepts we inherited. Fuelling this reconciliation, usually, is some kind of holism about our conceptual repertoire. On one version, it does not matter which concepts we use, as long as the judgements we form with them are true and the concepts combine well enough to form an internally consistent and coherent conceptual scheme. Agonizing over which concepts to use then seems like agonizing over the weave pattern of a fishing net: such a net could be composed of triangles, squares, hexagons, or intricately combine all of these, but it is immaterial which pattern we use as long as the net's overall integrity is preserved. The choice of which web of concepts to use may be constrained at the edges by merely pragmatic considerations—there are some webs that human beings, with their limited cognitive and perceptual capacities, are incapable of deploying effectively—but otherwise, the choice remains rationally undetermined: it is voluntaristic or arbitrary. As Huw Price describes the view: 'Not only is language less of a prison than philosophy usually imagines … we can put the walls wherever we like!' (2018, 469).

In another version of this holistic view—associated, notably, with functionalist holism in anthropology and with communitarianism in social and political philosophy—

the holism is given a more explicitly functionalist and adaptationist rationale: a society's conceptual repertoire is pictured as a harmoniously interlocking whole that has organically grown out of a particular way of life, and has over time become adapted to that way of life. This makes it the best conceptual apparatus *for* that way of life. Displace one concept, and you diminish the functionality of the whole.

Both forms of holism manage to rid themselves of the hankering after timeless and mind-independent rational foundations: they are genuinely *non-foundationalist*. But the result, in either version, is that indiscriminate rejection gives way to undiscriminating acceptance. The result is an 'enthusiasm for the folk-ways' that has been called 'the continuation of Hegelian conservatism by other means' (Williams 2021, 278).

My aim in this book is to develop a theory of reasons for concept use that does without timeless and mind-independent rational foundations, and yet still gives us a basis on which to discriminate between concepts and ground our confidence in reasons, so that we may escape the trilemma between foundationalism, indiscriminate ironism, and undiscriminating holism. I try to do without the idea that there are timeless and mind-independent rational foundations from which one set of concepts could be authenticated as absolutely best—indeed, I try to do away with the very idea that such foundations, whether available or not, would be desirable. At the same time, I hold on to the idea that it really does matter which concepts we use, because which true judgements we are capable of forming, and which reasons we are responsive to, significantly shapes how we conduct our affairs. What is needed to occupy this middle ground is a framework for concept appraisal that does not require timeless foundations while still enabling us to discriminate between concepts on a case-by-case basis instead of only considering the web of our concepts as a whole.

One influential way of appraising and improving our conceptual apparatus piecemeal without relying on foundations has been to fasten on how messy and defective our inherited concepts appear when measured against the formal ideal of a tidy theory: many of our concepts are imprecise, vague, indeterminate, inconsistent, and incoherently related to other concepts. By moving to concepts that are more precise, determinate, consistent, and coherent, philosophers can fix these defects. The concepts we end up with may not be timelessly the best ones, but at least their precision, determinacy, consistency, and other theoretical virtues promise to guard against the dangers inherent in slovenly

thinking.

Yet I want to resist this view as well—or rather, I want to put it in its place and expose what it leaves out. Faced with theoretically virtuous concepts recommending something that radically conflicts with what our less tidy but entrenched concepts lead us to think, it becomes a real question why we should care so much about theoretical virtues as to overturn concepts that have at least as much force with us. To answer that question, a more comprehensive approach is needed, one that can situate the importance of theoretical virtues within a wider picture of what we want from our concepts, and make sense of how even theoretical vices can be virtues in other respects.

To this end, the book develops a *needs-based* approach to concept appraisal: it proposes to appraise predicates by predicaments, determining which concepts we should use by identifying the concepts we need.[35] What most immediately gives us reason to use certain concepts rather than others is our *conceptual needs*—our needs *for* certain concepts. What engenders those needs, however, is the way our various concerns interact with our limited capacities and circumstances. It is those human concerns—what we fundamentally care about—that concepts must ultimately tie in with if they are to be helpful. In this sense, the approach could equally be said to be concern-based. But concerns alone still leave our conceptual choices underdetermined. It is to the conceptual needs that result from the way our concerns are refracted through particular capacities and circumstances that we must look for a unifying methodological lens that allows us to bring the disparate plurality of relevant factors to a common focus in reflection.

As the phrase 'needs-based' is ordinarily used, that subtlety is already built in: when we talk of 'needs-based scholarships', the idea is not that some people have an intrinsic need for scholarships. The idea is that some people need a scholarship *if* they are to satisfy their concern to study, given their limited capacity to pay for it under the circumstances.

[35] The approach paradigmatically applies to predicates, since predicates are more likely to raise the authority question and the thick normative concepts I focus on are predicates; but, strictly speaking, the approach is not inherently limited to predicates, and could be extended to singular terms. Indeed, it could be extended to the very structure of thinking in terms of singular terms and predicates articulating the world in terms of objects and their properties and relations. See Brandom (2000, ch. 4) for an argument in that direction.

Asked for a reason that justifies giving someone a scholarship, however, it is not their concern to study that we point to, but the fact that they need the scholarship. It is already built into this instrumental sense of 'need' that the need is itself the product of a particular combination of concerns, capacities, and circumstances.

Instead of simply requiring us to conform our concepts to an order of things about which we do not have a say, or to a tidy theoretical structure, a needs-based approach to concept appraisal humanizes the standard to which concepts are answerable, turning that standard itself into a function of human concerns. On the resulting view, we are the ones who *authorize* our concepts, in both senses of that useful term: we are their authors, and we lend them authority, for it is by tying in with human concerns that concepts earn their keep.

At the same time, the standard of concept appraisal should not *just* be a function of human concerns, but also of what our worldly circumstances are and what capacities we bring to them, leaving us firmly constrained by reality in what kinds of concepts we can have reason to use. Our conceptualizations are not sequestered in the mind and sealed off from the world. They are conceptualizations *of* something, and it is part of the point of many conceptualizations, including notably those of natural kinds, that they defer to the nature of what they refer to: if a tension emerges between our conceptualizations of natural kinds and what the world actually turns out to be like, we adapt our conceptualizations—whereas with normative concepts, it tends to be the other way round: we try to reshape the world so that it lives up to our conceptualizations of ideals such as equality of opportunity.

The account of conceptual authority I propose accommodates rather than negates the role of worldly structure. To the extent that the world has an antecedent structure, that structure co-determines what concepts we need given our concerns and capacities, because it significantly shapes the *circumstances* in which those concepts are put to work, and one of the things we notably need at least some of our concepts to do is to be sensitive to our circumstances, both social and natural.[36]

But sensitivity to worldly structure is not everything; nor is it self-explanatory. In any given part of our conceptual repertoire, our relative sensitivity or insensitivity to worldly

[36] This comes out particularly vividly in Millikan's (2017) account of why the concepts we live by—our 'unicepts', as she now prefers to call them—must latch onto the 'clumpy world' we inhabit.

structure itself has to be explained in terms of our concerns and capacities. I aim not to supplant, but to supplement the often one-sided emphasis on structural features of the world as determinants of what concepts we should use by factoring in comparatively underexplored co-determinants that are more internal to human affairs: what concepts we need is a function not only of our worldly circumstances, but also of our concerns and capacities, because our worldly circumstances only put pressure on our concepts as a result of our pursuing certain concerns with certain capacities. We could not fully make sense of the authority of worldly structure without drawing on the facts about us that fuel our interest in worldly structure to begin with. The ethics of conceptualization is a three-way negotiation: what our concepts should demand of us depends on what the world demands of us given what we demand of the world.

Accordingly, the guiding intuition of the needs-based approach is that the value of a concept lies in the way it proves *of* value *to us* by meeting our conceptual needs. These conceptual needs are importantly different from the goals, aims, and purposes that figure so prominently in many influential approaches to conceptual ethics and engineering.[37] 'Purposes', as Jennifer Nado for example puts it, 'can be discarded' (2020, 13). But our conceptual needs are not so easily discarded. We may not even be cognizant of them. They are not necessarily something we consciously pursue, like goals, aims, or purposes. They are the opaque correlates of the way the concerns we pursue interact with the capacities with which and the circumstances in which we pursue them. What our conceptual needs are can come as a discovery. We may never even have thought about our conceptual needs, let alone embraced them as goals. And yet, as I shall argue, it is when concepts align with the conceptual needs we have in virtue of concerns we endorse that they are authoritative.

Dauntingly complex as the interactions between our concerns, capacities, and circumstances are, I will suggest that we can render them philosophically tractable by constructing what I call a *need matrix*: a three-pronged interpretative model of how the concerns, capacities, and circumstances of concept-users combine to generate a conceptual need. Such a need matrix can be used to determine what kind of concept best

[37] See, e.g., Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, b), Brigandt and Rosario (2020), Thomasson (2020b, a), Nado (2021), Haslanger (2020b), Simion and Kelp (2020), Riggs (2021), and Jorem (2022). Colton (2023) stresses various differences between needs and goals, though not in connection with concepts.

meets that need. Like the matrix from which printing type is cast, the need matrix acts as a mould from which to cast fitting building-blocks of thought.

The first of the two main theses of the book, then, is that if our minds are moulded by our conceptualizations, our conceptualizations should be moulded by our needs. For it is in our conceptual needs, which grow out of the way the concerns we pursue interact with the capacities and circumstances in which we pursue them, that we find reasons for concept use. In light of those reasons, concepts will emerge as authoritative, roughly, when they align with the needs we now have, in virtue of concerns we critically identify with.

This needs-based view of conceptual authority thus breaks with philosophy's traditional quest for the concepts that are absolutely best. Yet despite this, I will argue that this approach allows us to reconcile ourselves to the contingency of our concepts and avoid indiscriminate alienation from our concepts.

At the same time, the needs-based approach also avoids the opposite danger—the undiscriminating acceptance of whatever concepts we inherited. Appraising concepts according to our conceptual needs enables critical reevaluations of our conceptual inheritance. It promises to give us a nuanced and case-specific sense of how to conceptualize things by helping us to see which concepts we have most reason to operate with. As Chapters 9 and 10 illustrate, it even empowers us to adjudicate between competing proposals for how to understand contested notions such as *voluntariness* or *liberty*, thereby providing a basis for distinguishing between authoritative definition and conceptual gerrymandering.

The second main thesis of the book is that sometimes, concepts that conflict, or that exhibit other theoretical vices such as vagueness or superficiality, are just what we need. Conflict is not necessarily an affliction in thought; nor are the various forms of untidiness in our conceptual repertoire always defects to be remedied. They must of course appear as defects as long as we model our understanding of what makes a good concept on the virtues of a scientific theory. But the reluctance to do this without further argument is precisely what sets off the needs-based approach to conceptual authority from its closest non-foundationalist rival, the tidy-minded pursuit of conceptual authority through theoretical virtue.

By developing a way of vindicating the authority of concepts without simply invoking

the authority of theoretical virtues, the needs-based approach indicates a different way of practising philosophical reflection on our concepts, one that relies less on theory-construction and the realization of theoretical virtues, and more on the particular psychological, social, and institutional facts on the ground. If we consider not what concepts are timelessly or definitively best, but what concepts we now need, we can identify the proper remit of efforts to tidy up our conceptual repertoire, and thereby come to discriminate between helpful clarification and hobbling tidy-mindedness.

If the primary theme of the book is reasons for reasons, its secondary theme is therefore how the demand for such reasons can, depending on how one conceives of those reasons, press towards foundationalist theorizing and the tidy-minded pursuit of theoretical virtues, and why that pressure should sometimes be resisted. The question of what form reasons for reasons should take thus bears directly on the question of what form philosophy should take.

My thoughts on these issues have been shaped by two figures whose influence pervades the book. One is Friedrich Nietzsche, who, more than any other philosopher in the Western canon, embodies a sceptical readiness to question the authority not just of concrete institutions and individuals, but of the ideas they abide by. He thinks of the concepts that form the currencies of thought, and that we take our words to express, as cast by human beings, and he worries that 'counterfeiters of the mind' (83:18[1]) might have corrupted our reasoning with 'counterfeit' concepts. Rooting present-day conceptual ethics in a reading of its history that traces it to Nietzsche, and reaches through Nietzsche back to Kant, promises to enrich our sense of its possibilities and relevance. But for the appraisal of parochial concepts of the sort I focus on here, it is the self-described Hermit of Sils-Maria rather than the Sage of Königsberg that provides the main source of inspiration.[38] For while scepticism towards the authority of concepts is Kantian at root, Nietzsche's distinctive elaboration of that scepticism into what he billed as a 'real critique of concepts' (85:40[27]) is the more powerful for being piecemeal and applicable to any concept, however culturally distinctive or parochial, instead of being focused, as Kant was, on the authority of our reasoning faculty as a whole and the twelve transcendental categories of the understanding in particular. Nietzsche's use of

[38] Nietzsche would playfully sign some of his letters between 1884 and 1886 as *der Einsiedler von Sils-Maria*.

philosophy as piecemeal cultural critique renders his thought recognizably modern and marks it off from Enlightenment universalism.[39] He explores the ramifications of the realization that a culture's trajectory, and *a fortiori* the trajectory of an individual life, are shaped by the concepts people recognize as authoritative. If conceptual ethics has an avatar, it must be Nietzsche.

The other figure is Bernard Williams, whose *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, in particular, shaped my views on the place and merit of parochiality and tidiness in our thinking. Williams is routinely cast and taught as a purely negative and destructive philosopher, who cleverly chipped away at others' honest attempts at philosophical theorizing, but offered little by way of an alternative. I take the framework articulated in this book to be indicative of the more positive conception of philosophical reflection that underpins his work. By building a framework for conceptual ethics that develops, fuses, and harnesses various insights scattered across Williams's contributions to metaphilosophy, epistemology, ethics, metaethics, political philosophy, and the theory of action, we become equipped to appreciate how much of Williams's own work was itself a methodologically cohesive and constructive exercise in conceptual ethics—in line with his declared conviction that 'the task which provides the principal aim of all moral philosophy' is 'the ethical understanding of the ethical', the task 'of truthfully understanding what our ethical values are and how they are related to our psychology, and making, in the light of that understanding, a valuation of those values' (1995a, 578).[40] If Williams's work can inform this book, it is because he was himself, alongside Nietzsche, a paradigmatic practitioner of conceptual ethics.

The book is divided into four parts: the first (Chapters 1–3) sets up the discussion by introducing the guiding question, clarifying its terms, and examining what is involved in

[39] As noted also by Huddleston (2019, 171).

[40] Not only Williams's critique of the particular way in which certain important ethical concepts are understood within 'the morality system' and his critique of deepened conceptions of the voluntary can be thought of as exercises in conceptual ethics, but also his more constructive advocacy of certain conceptions of agency and responsibility, shame, regret, reasons, thick ethical concepts, and virtue-ethical concepts, including notably the 'virtues of truth'. As he also writes: 'our conceptions of freedom, responsibility, and blame are often not what they seem, and are variously exaggerated, self-deceiving, sentimental, or vindictive (epithets which themselves, it should be noticed, largely belong to an ethical vocabulary)' (1995a, 578).

raising it. Its main themes are the very idea of conceptual authority and how it differs from the normativity of concepts; the power exercised by concepts that motivates raising the question of their authority; our capacity to achieve critical distance towards our concepts by adopting what I shall call 'the autoethnographic stance' towards them; the distinction between engaged and disengaged concept use; the confusions that lead to objectionable forms of relativism; the different senses in which our concepts might be said to be contingent; the way our confidence in our concepts can be undermined by reflection and cause us to lose knowledge; but also the possibility of acquiring metaconceptual knowledge that certain concepts are the right ones for us.

The second part (Chapters 4–5) surveys the different answers that the question of the authority of concepts has received in the past. Discussing their shortcomings motivates the development of an alternative account and conveys a sense of the features it should have: it should generalize to thick normative concepts; it should not result in indiscriminate disengagement from our concepts; and it should not license the undiscriminating acceptance of our concepts. To this end, I suggest, the picture of our conceptual apparatus as something harmonious, largely tensionless, and inherently static must be replaced with a kaleidoscopic picture on which our conceptual apparatus is tension-ridden and dynamic; and the critical leverage of local needs must be harnessed by recognizing that the contingency of our concepts extends to the standards these concepts must meet. This still leaves one direct rival to the approach I aim to develop, however: the tidy-minded approach that seeks conceptual authority by eliminating theoretical vices such as vagueness, superficiality, and tensions from our conceptual repertoire. I explore these different theoretical vices and offer reasons to be critical of the tidy-minded approach as a general account of conceptual authority.

The third part (Chapters 6–8) lays out the needs-based approach to concept appraisal I advocate in this book. Using an underexplored debate between Ronald Dworkin and Bernard Williams as my springboard, I first introduce the basic idea that our concepts should make contact with the human concerns motivating their use. This brings out more sharply what the tidy-minded focus on theoretical virtues misses. But I argue that concerns alone are insufficient to determine which concepts we should use. A more complex framework is required, which I go on to develop by introducing the notions of a conceptual need, of the expressive character of concepts, of needfulness conditions, of

giving point to the use of a concept, and of need matrices. These notions combine into a powerful framework for needs-based concept appraisal. I then show how this allows us to answer the authority question without crowding out other kinds of reasons that transcend preoccupation with human concerns or with the instrumentality of concepts. On this basis, I articulate a needs-based conception of conceptual authority, on which concepts are authoritative if and to the extent that they meet the conceptual needs we have in virtue of concerns we identify with and would still endorse after well-informed reflection on the merits of those concerns and on how we came by them. I defuse the worry that this conception yields the wrong kind of reasons, and explore in what sense it still leaves room for concepts to be valuable in their own right, independently of how they serve our concerns.

The fourth and final part (Chapters 9–10) illustrates and refines the account by applying it to the particularly interesting cases of the concepts of voluntariness and liberty, where it emerges that superficial and conflicting concepts sometimes serve us best. These case studies not only further illustrate the approach, but also underscore several further insights it yields: that sometimes, powerful concerns can distort concepts out of the shape in which they best serve the balance of our concerns; that the very heterogeneity and conflict of human concerns can itself generate reasons to use certain concepts rather than others; and that there is a place in liberal democratic politics for the tidy-minded pursuit of theoretical virtues.

The hurried reader seeking to understand the mechanics of my view without much by way of motivating background, contrast foils, and detailed applications should focus on Chapters 1–3 and especially 6–8. By the end of the book, I hope to have substantiated and brought out the more surprising implications of what can seem like a platitude: that the way of thinking about concept appraisal we need is itself one that appraises our ways of thinking by our conceptual needs.

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