

# The Ethics of Conceptualization

*A Needs-Based Approach*

MATTHIEU QUELOZ

# Abstract

Philosophy strives to give us a firmer hold on our concepts. But what about their hold on us? Why place ourselves under the sway of a concept and grant it the authority to shape our thought and conduct? Another conceptualization would carry different implications. What makes one way of thinking better than another?

This book develops a framework for concept appraisal. Its guiding idea is that questioning the authority of concepts asks for reasons of a special kind: reasons for concept use, which tell us which concepts to adopt, adhere to, or abandon, thereby shoring up—or undercutting—the reasons for action and belief that guide our deliberations.

Traditionally, reasons for concept use have been sought either in timeless rational foundations or in concepts' inherent virtues, such as precision and consistency. Against this, the book advances two main claims: that we find reasons for concept use in the conceptual needs we discover when we critically distance ourselves from a concept by viewing it from the autoethnographic stance; and that sometimes, concepts that conflict, or exhibit other vices such as vagueness or superficiality, are just what we need.

By considering not what concepts are absolutely best, but what concepts we now need, we can reconcile ourselves to the contingency of our concepts, determine the proper place of efforts to tidy up thought, and adjudicate between competing conceptions of things, even when they are as contested as liberty or free will. A needs-based approach separates helpful clarification from hobbling tidy-mindedness, and authoritative definition from conceptual gerrymandering.

*Keywords:* conceptual ethics, conceptual engineering, thick concepts, authority, critique, contingency, knowledge, theoretical virtues, conflicts of value, pluralism, liberty, free will, responsibility, moral luck, action theory, Bernard Williams, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ronald Dworkin, Iris Murdoch, Susan Wolf.

# Contents

Introduction: Appraising Concepts	i
-----------------------------------	---

## PART I: RAISING THE AUTHORITY QUESTION

The Authority Question	1
1.1 Dworkin's Challenge	1
1.2 The Power of Conceptual Architectures	4
1.3 Expressing the Authority Question	13
1.4 When the Authority Question Arises	17
1.5 Beyond Epistemological Appraisal	24
The Autoethnographic Stance	31
2.1 Engaged vs. Disengaged Concept Use	31
2.2 The Ethnographic Stance	33
2.3 The Autoethnographic Stance	36
2.4 Conflating Engaged and Disengaged Use	41
2.5 Concepts: Their Nature and Possession	46
Confidence, Reflection, and Knowledge	56
3.1 Confidence in Concepts	56
3.2 Metaconceptual Reflection	61
3.3 Knowledge under Concepts	71
3.4 Metaconceptual Knowledge	79

## PART II: LEARNING FROM EXISTING ANSWERS

Anchoring Authority: A Trilemma	84
4.1 Generalized Foundationalism	84
4.2 Indiscriminate Ironism	90
4.3 Reasons for Us: Non-Foundationalism	93
4.4 Undiscriminating Holism	99
4.5 The Kaleidoscopic Picture	104
4.6 Leveraging Local Needs	108
Tidy-Mindedness	118
5.1 Theoretical Vices in Concepts	120
5.2 Superficial Concepts	122
5.3 Conceptual Tensions	126
5.4 Authority through Theoretical Virtue	140
5.5 Inheriting Authority from Theories	144

### PART III: HOW TO ANSWER THE AUTHORITY QUESTION

Concepts and Concerns	156
6.1 The Dworkin–Williams Debate	157
6.2 Tying Concepts to Concerns	169
6.3 The Practical Virtues of Theoretical Vices	176
6.4 The Limits of Concerns: Four Problems	184
Tailoring Thought to Need	189
7.1 Conceptual Needs	189
7.2 Needfulness Conditions	194
7.3 What Concepts Express	202
7.4 Need Matrices	208
7.5 Needs-Based Concept Appraisal	214
7.6 Four Problems Solved	221
Reasons for Reasons	228
8.1 Reasons in vs. Reasons for Concept Use	228
8.2 Concern-Independent Reasons in Concept Use	233
8.3 Instrumentality Without Instrumental Mentality	237
8.4 From Concerns to Reasons in Concept Use	241
8.5 Needs-Based Conceptual Authority	247
8.6 The Wrong Kind of Reasons?	262
8.7 Conceptual Good-for-Nothings	277

### PART IV: ANSWERING THE AUTHORITY QUESTION

The Essential Superficiality of the Voluntary	284
9.1 A Questionable Concept	284
9.2 Making Sense and Knowing What to Expect	290
9.3 Fairness and Freedom	298
9.4 Knowledge and Coercion	301
9.5 When Concerns Distort Conceptualization	305
9.6 Deep Conceptions of the Voluntary	307
9.7 Free Will as a Dual Problem	311
The Politics of Conflicting Concerns	322
10.1 Political Disagreement and Its Demands	322
10.2 The Dworkin–Williams Debate Continued	326
10.3 A Thoroughly Political Conception of Liberty	328
10.4 Conceptual Needs on the Losing Side	331
10.5 Conceptual Needs on the Winning Side	334
10.6 Placing the Demand for Theoretical Virtues	342
Conclusion: Needful Concepts	357
Bibliography	362