



the concept of *democracy*

an essay on conceptual amelioration and abandonment

HERMAN CAPPELEN

OXFORD

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*An Essay on Conceptual Amelioration
and Abandonment*

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For Nora and Rachel

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Preface and Acknowledgements

There's a striking passage in Peirce's "How to Make Your Ideas Clear" that speaks to the issues discussed in this book:

Many a man has cherished for years as his hobby some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has, nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life, leaving all other occupations for its sake, and in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become, as it were, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked up some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished away like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it.

The concept of *democracy*, I argue, is a bit like one of these vague shadows of an idea that ought to vanish away like the beautiful Melusina. It's not pleasant (or easy) to be in the business of destroying beloved illusions, but if we're not doing it, philosophy loses most of its depth and maybe all of its value. David Lewis says, "It is the profession of philosophers to question platitudes that others accept without thinking twice. A dangerous profession, since philosophers are more easily discredited than platitudes, but a useful one." The core thesis of this book cuts close to the bone. It questions platitudes about "democracy" that many people feel passionately about both in their day-to-day life and in their theorizing. I argue they need to let go. The natural reaction is an incredulous stare and I don't expect many to be able to overcome that initial reaction. At best, it might trigger some constructive efforts to defend the *status quo*. Even so, it's worth trying.

Many people helped me along the way. I'm especially grateful for very detailed and constructive comments on the entire manuscript from Tristram McPherson. David Plunkett generously sacrificed many hours of skiing to instruct me on subtleties of democratic theory (in Zoom conversations made difficult both by the massive time difference between Jackson Hole and Hong Kong, and by the constant Covid-19 lockdowns). Alexi Burgess made a heroic effort to transform this into a book for the masses—the failure of that project lies entirely on my shoulders. Others who gave me

careful and constructive input include my brother Cornelius Cappelen, David Enoch, David Estlund, Kevin Scharp, Mark Richard, Max Deutsch, Mona Simion, Nick Taylor and Rachel Sterken. Dario Mortini and Matthew McKeever did extraordinary work as RAs. Two readers for OUP gave insightful and constructive comments. Finally, I'm grateful to my editor, Peter Momtchiloff, both for publishing this somewhat unorthodox book and for suggesting the title (which is a significant improvement on my original, unnecessarily provocative, title).

PART I
A THEORY OF ABANDONMENT

1

Introduction

This is a book for those interested in the words we use when we think and talk about politics. In particular, it is about the words “democracy” and “democratic.” It is an exploration of a radical view: abolitionism. According to abolitionists, those words (and the concepts they express) should be abandoned. The arguments for abolitionism are fairly simple to state:

- **We can do better than “democracy”:** We have easy access to terminology that’s better than “democracy” and “democratic.”
- **“Democracy” is semantically, cognitively, and communicatively defective:** The histories and current use of “democracy” and “democratic” make them cognitively, semantically, and communicatively defective.

The abolitionist’s argument is simple: *if these terms are defective and we can easily do better, then let’s get rid of them!* Abolitionism is a surprising and unsettling view because we’re not used to the idea that some of our linguistic devices can fail us. We tend to take for granted that when we have an entrenched lexical item, with a long history, we can reliably use it to express thoughts, communicate, plan, and coordinate action. One broader lesson of this book is that such confidence is misplaced: we should take seriously the possibility that failure is an option.

Abolitionism is not all gloom and doom. It contains a message of good cheer: *we have easy access to conceptual devices that are more effective than “democracy.” We can do better.* These alternative linguistic devices will enable us to ask better questions, provide genuinely fruitful answers, and have more rational discussions. Moreover, those questions and answers better articulate the communicative and cognitive aims of those who use empty terms such as “democracy” and “democratic.” The switch to alternative devices would be a significant communicative, cognitive, and political advance.

This book is not an unconditional defense of abolitionism. It’s a defense of the view that a strong case can be made for abolitionism relative to many

(or most) important contexts. Overall, the current reliance on this cluster of concepts is a cognitive weak spot.

It's important to emphasize that abolitionism is not an argument **against democracy**. It's an argument **against "democracy."** The difference really matters. Abolitionism is not a defense of epistocracy,¹ dictatorship, or any other form of governance considered to be an alternative to what people call "democracy."² If the question you're interested in is, "Is democracy a good form of governance?", the abolitionist's reply is, *In most (or all) contexts, it's a bad question that doesn't deserve an answer—and I'll show you how to ask better questions that can be answered.* Abolitionists don't take a stand on how any group should make collective decisions, nor on how nations should decide on political issues. It's a view about which concepts are communicatively and cognitively useful when we talk and think about collective decision-making.

These conceptual questions are prior to and more fundamental than thinking about politics. In order to start thinking about politics you first need to make conceptual choices. Most of us are not aware that we make those choices. We uncritically use the conceptual tools handed to us by tradition or authority. That can be an irresponsible attitude. In many cases, serious thinking should start by critically examining and refining the tools of thinking and talking. This book is an essay on that kind of foundational conceptual criticism and amelioration, applied to a core part of political discourse.

My discussion draws on recent work in philosophy and political theory. More specifically, it engages with issues at the intersection of philosophy of language, conceptual engineering, democratic theory, and politics. As an introduction to the central themes of the book, here are some directions from which you can get interested in all or parts of what I'll be discussing:

From an interest in the debate about the value and nature of democracy: If you're a typical reader of this book, you're likely to be a follower of what Bryan Caplan calls "the secular religion of democracy." In less tendentious terms, you're likely to think that what's called "democracy" is an excellent way to organize a nation—maybe even the best possible way to do it. More generally, you're likely to think that it's a good way for groups to make collective decisions. That view, however, is not universally shared.

¹ Like, e.g., Brennan (2016), Somin (2013), and Caplan (2008).

² Such as the idea that we should modify our institutions to have "less" democracy, such as less often or fewer occasions to vote (Jones 2020).

Plato despised democracy, the founding fathers of the US shunned the term “democracy” (by which they meant something like “direct democracy”), and there are contemporary theorists who argue against democracy. Bryan Caplan’s book *The Myth of the Rational Voter* aims to prod its readers to leave “the church of democracy.” The title of Jason Brennan’s book *Against Democracy* speaks for itself. Many readers will have a mixed view according to which (at least some) political decisions should be taken in a democratic way, but it’s OK that *The New York Times*, Harvard, and Tesla are non-democratic. Among those who like what they call “democracy,” there’s intense disagreement about both what the term means and the justification for that meaning (Chapters 4 and 5 go through this in more detail).

Abolitionism is an alternative view that has not, as far as I know, been defended before. Abolitionists argue that these debates over “democracy” should be rejected because the concept is defective at its core. Questions such as, “Is democracy a good form of governance?” and “Is democracy better than epistocracy?” are, despite appearances, bad questions that can’t be answered because the concept of *democracy* is defective and can’t be ameliorated. Abolitionists provide a diagnosis of why we ended up relying on the concept of “democracy,” and show how to do better. Caplan was almost right: there’s a secular religion, but it’s not of democracy, it’s of the concept of *democracy*.

For many readers, the view that “democracy” is so defective that it should be abandoned is extremely hard to believe, or even to take seriously.³ After all, when I say, “Norway is a democracy,” that seems like a paradigmatic, clear, and meaningful statement that can be used to communicate a clear thought. It is hard to accept that entrenched and widely used terminology can be meaningless. To soften the reader up to the idea, the first part of this book provides a general introduction to the theory of defective concepts, which I call the *theory of abandonment*.⁴ I draw on a broad range of examples from science, politics, and ordinary life to show that we have frequently used concepts that we have later discovered are fundamentally flawed. The goal of those examples is twofold: (i) to make the (apparently) incredible conclusion that “democracy” should be rejected more palatable, and even

³ I should qualify this: when I bring up how hard it is to believe the conclusion of this book to students, there are often many of them who disagree—to them, it’s almost trivial that “democracy” and other terms are empty shells without meaning.

⁴ To be clear: I’m using “abandonment” to denote what the abolitionist advocates. Thanks to an OUP reader for noting that this could be unclear.

plausible; and (ii) to open up general systematic study of the conditions under which concepts and lexical items should be abandoned.

From an interest in conceptual engineering: Conceptual engineering, as I think of it,⁵ has three stages:

- (i) The assessment of our concepts, or, more generally, our representational devices.
- (ii) Proposed improvements to our representational devices.
- (iii) Efforts to implement those proposed improvements.

My earlier work on conceptual engineering (e.g., Cappelen 2018) had two limitations:

- First, I focused on cases where there were live ameliorative options.
- Second, the discussion was on a very high level of abstraction and without commitment to any particular case. That book discusses a lot of examples, but doesn't endorse any of them. As far as the arguments in Cappelen (2018) go, there might be *no* successful cases of conceptual engineering. The entire discussion takes the form, "If this ameliorative proposal were acceptable, then . . ."

This book is different. It takes seriously the possibility that the assessment stage can reveal defects so significant that (complete or partial) abandonment is justified. I call the exploration of that option the *theory of abandonment*. Part I is an introduction to this theory. The rest of the book then focuses on an extremely difficult and controversial case study: "democracy" and "democratic." Given inherent bias in favor of lexical conservatism, I don't expect the conclusion to convince all that many people. That said, it might move some people to take seriously a contextually restricted version of the thesis.

As will become clear, there is no algorithm for how to justify abandonment: a lot will depend on the details of particular cases. However, once you start abandoning terms, it becomes tempting to overuse this strategy. It turns out that many of our inherited and entrenched concepts are shady.

⁵ See Cappelen (2018, 2020a), the papers collected in Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett (2020) and Eklund (2021) for synoptic presentations of the field; see Eklund (2017), Haslanger (2000), and Plunkett and Sundell (2013) for the application of conceptual engineering to social or normative philosophy.

This observation then raises an exciting new and large-scale research project: what should be abandoned and what should be preserved? What are the conditions under which abandonment is justified? How is abandonment implemented? How do abolitionists relate to diehard preservationists?

From an interest in the methodology of political theory: Political science and political theory have a significant methodological literature focused on the conceptual foundation of politics. Some of that literature concerns what we might call the nature of conceptual analysis. Sartori authored the seminal papers on this issue (e.g., Sartori 1970, 1987, 1991). This work has been influential in the intervening decades, and one assumption underlying it is a notion of conceptual “stretchiness,” which refers to applying concepts to cases distinct from those for which they were originally developed.⁶ A different strand of the literature, which also includes work on metaethics and the foundations of political philosophy, is concerned with essentially contested concepts (Gallie 1956). This idea—roughly, that there are some concepts whose definition is always up for debate and never settled—has been important (see Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006 for an overview), especially because Gallie said that democracy was an essentially contested concept “*par excellence*.”⁷ This book aims to incorporate recent work in conceptual engineering and metasemantics into these debates. In doing so, I also try to align discussions of terms such as “democracy” with how, say, epistemologists have used facts about the expression “knows” to understand knowledge.

From an interest in bullshit and the declining quality of public discourse: At the beginning of his book *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt says: “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this.” Frankfurt develops a primarily epistemic account of what bullshit is. The bullshitter is someone who “...offers a description of a certain state of affairs without genuinely submitting to the constraints which the endeavor to provide an accurate representation of reality imposes. Her fault is not that she fails to get things right, but that she is not even trying.” (Frankfurt 2005: 32) According to Frankfurt, politics

⁶ Something that became important in the twentieth century, as democracies increased in number and also variation, and as quantitative methods were increasingly used to define democracy. Further influential work in this vein is theorizing about democracy “with adjectives,” for example in David Collier and his coauthors (Collier and Mahon 1993; Collier and Levitsky 1997; Collier and Adock 1999).

⁷ There is interesting work in philosophy here, e.g., Väyrynen (2014); Evnine (2014). For examples of recent work that aims to be synoptic or advance the debate concerning concepts in political theory, see, e.g., Olsthoorn (2017) and Gerring (2012).

and public discourse are primary sources of bullshit: "... (it) is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about." The political domain is one in which there are endless opportunities and even obligations for citizens to talk about issues they hardly understand (Frankfurt 2005: 63).

G. A. Cohen, in his paper "Deeper Into Bullshit," builds on Frankfurt's analysis, but focuses on whether what bullshitters say is meaningful (rather than whether they're tracking truth). Cohen points out that nonsense is one meaning of "bullshit" in colloquial English. For Cohen, the most interesting form of nonsense is found in discourse that is "... not only obscure but which cannot be rendered unobscure, where any apparent success in rendering it unobscured creates something that isn't recognizable as a version of what is said" (Cohen 2002: 332).

The idea that there's a lot of bullshit shouldn't be left as a theoretical and abstract possibility. We might all share Frankfurt's sense that a very large part of what counts as political discourse consists primarily of bullshit, but one needs to flesh out that idea with concrete examples. This book is in part an effort to identify a particularly important source of bullshit in contemporary public discourse.

From an interest in verbal disputes: How widespread they are and how they can be avoided. A central claim in David Chalmers's seminal paper "Verbal Disputes" is that much of the history of philosophy consists of verbal disputes. For Chalmers, such disputes are both pointless and fake. They are the result of people using words with different meanings without realizing it. They are not substantive disputes, and can be resolved meta-linguistically, by the participants being explicit about what they actually mean. Doing so requires eliminating the terminology that's the source of the confusion. Chalmers claims that debates over all of the following questions have been beset by verbal disputes:

What is free will? What is knowledge? What is justification? What is justice? What is law? What is confirmation? What is causation? What is color? What is a concept? What is meaning? What is action? What is life? What is logic? What is self-deception? What is group selection? What is science? What is art? What is consciousness? And indeed: What is a verbal dispute? Chalmers 2002, 405

If, like me, you are sympathetic to Chalmers's view, it should be obvious that the problem isn't restricted to philosophy. If it's found in philosophy,

it’s everywhere. Think of this book as (in part) an application of Chalmers’s framework to “democracy” and “democratic.”⁸ The view is inspired by Chalmers not just in making the claim that discourses involving “democracy” are infected by endless verbal disputes but also in suggesting that this issue be resolved by eliminating “democracy” from such discourses (in effect applying Chalmers’s method of elimination).

Stepping Back: “Democracy,” Politics, and Philosophy

I’ll end this introductory chapter with an overview of the different parts of the book, but before doing so, I’ll try to briefly locate the topic of the book and its central thesis within current non-academic political discourse. While the book is about some words, it’s obvious that the primary interest of these words is derived from the central role they play in contemporary political discourse. The word “democracy” does a lot of work for us. Not a day goes by without serious warnings about the threat to democracy from China, Russia, and Hungary. The Republican Party is regularly described as moving in an anti-democratic direction. Prominent public intellectuals such as Anne Applebaum and Timothy Snyder warn us against the seductive lure of authoritarianism. *The Washington Post* recently published an article with the headline, “Historians privately warn Biden that America’s democracy is teetering.”⁹ It quotes a “person familiar with the exchange” as saying, “A lot of the conversation was about the larger context of the contest between democratic values and institutions and the trends toward autocracy globally.”

One glaring problem with this way of framing the political terrain is that we have no *agreed upon understanding* of what the word “democracy” means, what democracy is, or what it ought to be. *This is uncontroversial*. Any decent introductory text on democratic theory or practice will tell you upfront that there are deep and potentially irresolvable disagreements about how to define “democracy.” Directors of the Economist Intelligence Unit

⁸ A reader for OUP asks whether my talk about verbal disputes in this book presupposes a background form of semantic internalism (and so is in conflict with my Cappelen 2018). It does not. There can be verbal disputes at the semantic level (corresponding to Chalmers’s narrow notion) or at a speaker-meaning level (corresponding to Chalmers’s broad notion). Both are compatible with both semantic internalism and semantic externalism.

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/10/biden-us-historians-democracy-threat/>.

(EIU), in an introduction to their Index of Democracy, acknowledge that “There is no consensus on how to measure democracy. Definitions of democracy are contested, and there is a lively debate on the subject.” Political sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz has written, “The world’s only superpower is rhetorically and militarily promoting a political system that remains undefined—and it is staking its credibility and treasure on that pursuit.”

Now, you might have thought ‘democracy’ just means something like *a form of governance where there are regular, free, and fair elections of political representatives, sometimes combined with votes on referendums*. This definition squares with common sense, and has a distinguished intellectual pedigree, but it makes democracy too easy to fake. Imagine an elected leader who uses the powers of their office, along with state-of-the-art propaganda, to manipulate the populace, marginalize any opposition, and thereby mold “the will of the people” to ensure their continued reign. This is why Amartya Sen emphasizes that “...it is crucial to appreciate that democracy has demands that transcend the ballot box... Balloting alone can be woefully inadequate, as is abundantly illustrated by the astounding electoral victories of ruling tyrannies in authoritarian regimes, from Stalin’s Soviet Union to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.” The point applies to direct and indirect democracy alike.

It’s for these reasons that organizations such as Freedom House and the EIU publish nuanced rankings of *how* democratic various countries are—taking into account a broad range of factors beyond voting itself. The EIU measures countries along sixty dimensions, including the percentage of women in parliament, adult literacy, the degree of religious tolerance, and the proportion of the population that believes that democracy benefits economic performance. These democracy indices help flesh out our “democratic values.” But they inevitably seem parochial and unprincipled: a grab bag of features that happen to be vaunted by certain people in a certain culture at a certain historical moment. Who gets to pick the dimensions, and how do they decide which ones or how many to include? How can they be quantified, aggregated, or meaningfully compared? And what exactly makes them measures of *democracy*? Again, all these difficulties are well known and carefully elaborated in scholarly work.

Here’s the conundrum: isn’t it intellectually and politically irresponsible to put our faith in something—‘democracy’—when we don’t know what ‘democracy’ means or, correspondingly, what democracy is? Over the last century, philosophers of language have had a lot to say about how we should

react to terminology that appears to be deeply defective. That focus has been amplified by recent work in conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics. We can think of theorists as responding in four ways to the types of problems outlined in connection with ‘democracy.’ Some are **libertarians** and refuse to engage in meaning-policing: let a thousand meanings bloom, they say. Some are **ameliorators** and try to make language better by improving the situation. Some are **Cynics** who say that political speech is already so corrupt and empty that there’s no point trying to fix it. Finally, and this is the direction I am leaning in, there’s **abolitionism**: the view that we can do better than ‘democracy.’

The **libertarian** thinks that we don’t need to (and maybe we can’t) decide what “democracy” means. People who theorize about democracy shouldn’t be in the business of policing public language. To repeat: let a thousand definitional flowers bloom, says the libertarian. This view has a deeply entrenched intellectual tradition behind it. Using terminology introduced by Walter Gallie in 1957, philosophers and political theorists often say “democracy” is an “essentially contested” concept. According to Gallie, some expressions—“art” and “democracy” being paradigms—have their meanings settled in situ by the values, priorities, and goals of individual speakers.¹⁰ Since our values, priorities, and goals will obviously differ, the meanings of these words will be constantly renegotiated.

Even though Gallie’s view has been very influential and is widely accepted by academics, the implications for real-world politics are often overlooked. Consider a document the Chinese government released in 2021 called “China: Democracy that Works.” The authors say: “There is no fixed model of democracy; it manifests itself in many forms. Assessing the myriad political systems in the world against a single yardstick and examining diverse political structures in monochrome are in themselves undemocratic.” This sounds very much like a Gallie-inspired form of libertarianism. The document then details the democratic structures at play within the Chinese government, from electoral democracy to consultative democracy. It goes on to argue that China is one of the best-functioning democracies on earth: “In the richly diverse world, democracy comes in many forms. China’s democracy is thriving alongside those of other countries in the garden of civilizations.”

¹⁰ Warning: while I think that Gallie’s view is useful for heuristic purposes as an introduction to the topic, I don’t think this a good theory (or even really a theory at all). For further discussion, see Chapter 12.

Many would balk, dismissing the document as propaganda. But even so, its existence raises a legitimate conceptual challenge, especially for the conceptual libertarian. According to the libertarian, people are free to develop their own concept of democracy, according to their context, their values, and their goals. If that's the right view, who is to say that the Chinese government's definition isn't as legitimate as, say, that of the editors of *The Economist*?

You don't have to go to China to feel the force of this problem. Within the US there are deep divisions about what it means to support "democracy." The 45th President of the US (and the movement he leads) is regularly described as "authoritarian" and "anti-democratic." However, in a speech after the 2020 election, Mr. Trump said: "I'm not the one trying to undermine American democracy, I'm the one who's trying to save it. Please remember that." Trump likes the word "democracy" and wants it to apply to the type of governance he supports. If Gallie and the libertarians are right, China, Trump, and the editors of the Economist Intelligence Unit might all be right, because they use the word "democracy" with different meanings. There's no absolute truth about what "democracy" means or what democracy is. While some might be happy with this, it will strike many of us as an untenable form of relativism that makes it hard to see what it would mean for there to be an ongoing battle between democracies and authoritarianism. It makes public discourse involving "democracy" a depressing and never-ending orgy of verbal disputes.

In response to these concerns, the **ameliorator** tries to improve "democracy" by giving it a clear, appropriate, and fixed meaning. It's hard to see how to achieve this, but one strategy can be modeled on what often happens in the sciences. When scientists (e.g., in physics, medicine, or economics) use an expression with a determined meaning, it has that meaning independently of whether it is used in a messy way by the rest of the linguistic community. According to an influential tradition in the philosophy of language (often associated with Hilary Putnam), this is called "linguistic division of labor" and it allows ordinary speakers to piggyback on the experts' precise meaning. For example, what "weight" means in physics is fixed in a clear and precise way, independently of how that term is used by ordinary speakers of English (where "mass" and "weight" are often used interchangeably). What "arthritis" means in English depends on how medical experts use that term, independently of whatever confused views ordinary speakers have about arthritis.

In theory, amelioration is a promising strategy, but the problem is that the way "democracy" is tied to norms, values, and practical policies makes it

very different from "weight" and "arthritis." Since there's no convergence on the relevant norms, values, and practical policies, we're simply not going to get a convergence on the meaning of "democracy" (in the way we have for "weight" and "arthritis"). Even among political scientists, there are deep and irresolvable disagreements about how to define "democracy." We find everything from Schumpeterian minimalists (where the only thing that matters is an occasional election) to quantitative maximalists (where a broad range of cultural, normative, and institutional factors are quantified as part of the various democracy indices). And that's just including a tiny sample from the Western traditions. If there's no convergence even among experts, we're back to the messy libertarian reality of many meanings. You can, of course, try, as an individual thinker and speaker, to mean something very specific when you use the term "democracy," but others will not pick up on that meaning, and so your idiosyncratic usage will just contribute to the increased cacophony of "democracy" meanings.

This brings us to the *Cynic*, who says we shouldn't worry too much about these problems, because they are ubiquitous and ineliminable aspects of political discourse. According to the *Cynic*, it's naive to think that the central goal of political speech is to convey clear thoughts or engage in rational deliberation. As Harry Frankfurt points out, "The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept."¹¹ In this spirit, the *Cynic* says that the word "democracy" can serve its various non-rational political purposes independently of any clear or agreed-on meaning. To ask for precise definitions and coordinated meanings is to misunderstand the nature and goal of political discourse.

While there's certainly something to be said for the *Cynic's* picture of political speech, it is also defeatist and hyperbolic. Surely, not all political speech is empty of clear thought, even though some salient examples are. If you're a theorist, a public intellectual, a serious journalist, or an honest politician, you don't want to self-identify as a bullshitter whose aim is simply to spew empty rhetoric. You'll want to do better.

So the conundrum remains: we can't have a broad range of meanings (as the libertarian advocates) and we are unlikely to converge on a single meaning (as the ameliorator hopes for). At the same time, we want to

¹¹ Frankfurt 2009.

improve on the current state of discourse involving “democracy” (contrary to the Cynic). This book is primarily an exploration of (and tentative defense of) an **abolitionist** solution to the conundrum. The abolitionist puts less weight on high-level abstract and vague terminology such as “democracy” (and its contrast, “authoritarianism”), and instead relies on terms that are less problematic and contested. We should aim to anchor political discourse in careful descriptions, analyses, and assessments of particular policies, structures, and actions, grounded in a detailed understanding of historical, cultural, and economic contexts. For some illustrations of abolitionism at work, first consider the familiar claim that the Trump-dominated GOP is undermining democracy in the US and moving in an authoritarian direction. Protect Democracy usefully develops this concern on seven fronts: 1) *The GOP attempts to politicize independent institutions.* 2) *They spread disinformation.* 3) *They aggrandize executive power at the expense of checks and balances.* 4) *They quash criticism and dissent.* 5) *They specifically target vulnerable or marginalized communities.* 6) *They work to corrupt elections.* 7) *They stoke violence.* It’s important to have a debate about the extent to which 1–7 are true about the GOP, and how to respond to those that are. However, according to the abolitionist, it would be a waste of time to try to figure out whether these seven points *really* are in conflict with the correct definition of “democracy.” Even if Mr. Trump or one of his followers came up with a definition of “democracy” according to which the GOP is the true defender of “democracy,” and even if we accept that there’s no unique correct definition of “democracy,” we should still be worried about points 1–7. Convergence on the correct definition of “democracy” is at best a distracting detour.

Next, consider Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, which is often described as yet another “attack on democracy.” Even if we abandon that terminological perspective, we have plenty to say about what has happened, why it happened, and why it’s horrific. Putin has started an unjustified war, he murders innocent people, bombs apartment buildings, makes people starve, etc. To think that all of this (and much more) is usefully summarized by claims about “democracy vs. authoritarianism” risks missing most of what is important, to instead hang everything on the interpretation of a piece of terminology with a dubious foundation.

More generally, the abolitionist strategy of downplaying our reliance on terms such as “democracy” goes hand in hand with a tendency to put less weight on the Grand Narrative of contemporary geopolitics as an ongoing battle of “Democracy vs. Authoritarianism.” That’s an attractive heuristic—it

helps us unify diverse phenomena and find simplicity in the extraordinary complexity of contemporary politics. However, we should also recognize that some simplifications are dangerous and undermine our ability not just to understand the world but also to communicate about it. When there are serious wrongdoings happening, we owe it to those who are harmed to make an extra effort to think clearly, carefully, and in high resolution. If we find that the Grand Narrative (and its associated terminological paraphernalia) is an unhelpful simplification, we should outgrow it.

The above is one way to think about how various issues that have been at the center of recent (and not so recent) work in philosophy of language interconnect with large-scale political issues. This book, however, is not about those political issues. It is focused on a very narrow range of linguistic issues: whether “democracy” and “democratic” are meaningful, whether they are effective communicative devices, and whether we can do better. That said, it is useful to keep in mind that a significant reason for taking an interest in these words is that they play such an important (and I think problematic) role in public discourse, deliberation, and decision-making.

Overview of the Book

Here’s a quick overview of the book and its chapters:

- Part I (Chapters 1–4) outlines a theory of abandonment in general terms, without a focus on any particular cases. Chapter 2 presents four kinds of argument that can support abandonment. Chapter 3 addresses various issues having to do with how abolitionists can and should communicate with preservationists. Chapter 4 compares abandonment with related but distinct notions such as amelioration, reduction, elimination, and replacement.
- Part II (Chapters 5 and 6) prepares the case against “democracy” by investigating various and often overlooked features of the use of this word in English. There will be a particular focus on the interaction between the noun “democracy” and the adjective “democratic.”
- Part III presents the case for abandonment. Chapter 7 presents the defects of “democracy” and “democratic.” Chapter 8 shows how easy it is to do better. Finally, Chapter 9 describes the consequences of abandonment.

- Part IV considers an alternative to abandonment: amelioration (the theme of Cappelen 2018). Chapters 10 and 11 investigate whether we could ameliorate “democracy” rather than abandon it. The conclusion is rather negative.
- Part V consists of a brief concluding chapter where I consider various objections to both abandonment and to the project as a whole.

Before getting started, I need to flag one persistent expository problem: this book argues for the abandonment of “democracy” and “democratic.” Along the way, I engage with a lot of literature that uses those terms, and I must present and engage with these authors’ views. In doing so, I end up using “democracy” and “democratic” occasionally. While this is in principle avoidable, the cost would be an unreadable book with weird sentences containing all too many quotation marks. In his paper “Elusive Knowledge,” David Lewis uses the word “knows” in ways that aren’t entirely compatible with the theory in that paper (sort of in the same way that I have a problem with using “democracy” in a book that argues against the use of “democracy”). Lewis is aware of the problem and his response is, I think, perfect:

I could have said my say fair and square bending no rules. It would have been tiresome, but it could have been done. The secret would have been to resort to ‘semantic ascent’... If you want to hear my story told that way, you probably know enough to do the job for yourself. If you can, then my informal presentation has been good enough.

When distancing from the terminology is easy and appropriate, I’ll often use the expression “the D-words” to denote “democracy” and “democratic” (but, admittedly, I haven’t been able to develop an entirely consistent convention for how to do this).¹²

¹² Here’s a related complication that I’m completely ignoring in the upcoming chapters: there are many theories about what concepts are, what the relationships are between concepts and meaning, and how lexical items fit into all of this. The situation is worse than that: I am sympathetic to the view in (Machery 2009) in which he argues that we should abandon the term ‘concept’. This makes my use of ‘concept’ and its cognates deeply problematic. I wish I had a satisfactory solution, but one can only do so much at a time. If I were to write this whole book in a ‘concept’-free way, it would make the book less accessible and it would bake unrelated controversial assumptions into the discussion. In a previous book on conceptual engineering (Cappelen 2018), I developed a framework for thinking about some of these issues (“the austerity framework”), and if you will, you can read this book in light of that. However, I think (but I’m not entirely sure) that most of what goes on in this book can be understood without taking on board any particular theory of concepts and their relationships to lexical items.

2

Arguments for Abandonment

Abandonment

During one of Oscar Wilde's trials, the opposing counsel pressed him on whether he found a certain short story to be blasphemous:

EDWARD CARSON: Do you think the story blasphemous?

OSCAR WILDE: *I think it violated every artistic canon of beauty.*

CARSON: I wish to know whether you thought the story blasphemous?

WILDE: *The story filled me with disgust. The end was wrong.*

CARSON: Answer the question, sir. Did you or did you not consider the story blasphemous?

WILDE: *I thought it disgusting.*

CARSON: ... You know that when the priest in the story administers poison to the boy, he uses the words of the sacrament of the Church of England?

WILDE: *That I entirely forgot.*

CARSON: Do you consider that blasphemous?

WILDE: *I think it is horrible. "Blasphemous" is not a word of mine.*¹

Wilde, like many of us, had abandoned the expression "blasphemy." His abandonment could have had many sources, but the most plausible one is that he didn't believe in any deity, and so the idea of disrespecting one didn't make sense. The concept "blasphemy" expressed or presupposed a worldview that he rejected, and that rejection brought with it abandonment of the concept (and the expression that picks out that concept). Abandonment, in its most abstract form, is the process whereby an entrenched expression/concept pair goes out of circulation. The expression will be used less and less frequently, and eventually not at all. Abandonment is a matter of degree,

¹ A transcript is available at <https://famous-trials.com/wilde/346-literarypart>. Wilde's phrase has been discussed a bit in the metaethics literature, notably by Bernard Williams (1995; 237), who can be interpreted as discussing something very close to abandonment (although he uses other terms).

at both a personal and a communal level. I might abandon a term completely (like slurs), or just in some settings. The number of abolitionists in a speech community can vary a lot: it could be just me, or I could be joined by a larger group of speakers.

Sometimes abandonment happens for uninteresting reasons. “Archibald Stansted Hall” is the name of a man who died 248 years ago. He lived an unremarkable life. He was a butcher who lived in London and died from a heart attack on June 5, 1773. He left behind two children and his wife. It’s probably been more than two hundred years since anyone has used “Archibald Stansted Hall.” The reason for that is entirely mundane: interest in the man was gradually reduced, eventually to a point at which no one remembered him. No one wanted to talk about Archibald. Since he was of no concern, his name was abandoned.

I mention the abandonment of “Archibald Stansted Hall” because it illustrates the most obvious and trivial way in which expressions are abandoned: for whatever reason, we lose interest in the thing the expression was about, and eventually we just forget about it. That’s probably the most common source of abandonment, and it’s philosophically uninteresting.

My goal here is to identify more interesting sources of abandonment. This chapter presents a framework for thinking about what constitutes a good and theoretically interesting reason for abandonment, how to implement such abandonment, and the consequences of it. The next part of the book applies this framework to one of the core concepts in political philosophy—*democracy*—and presents a range of considerations in favor of its abandonment. The general framework presented in this chapter sets the stage for the arguments about “democracy,” but throughout I’ll emphasize that the details of particular cases matter. It’s not simply a matter of applying a general framework to a particular case. Each case will involve details not found in other cases. However, seeing the proposal for abandoning “democracy” as an instance of a more general phenomenon will help to guide the investigation of that specific case.

I’ve been talking loosely about “philosophically interesting” abandonment, and it might help the reader to see some examples of what I mean by this. Philosophically interesting abandonment doesn’t happen just within philosophy—it happens also in science and ordinary speech. Here, I introduce a cluster of cases that illustrate what I have in mind; I shall have a bit more to say on some of these cases below.

- **The abandonment of racial and ethnic slurs:** Almost everyone is an abolitionist of racial and ethnic slurs. See, for one among many, Hom

(2008), which presents as an attractive feature of his view the fact that slurs don't have First Amendment protection, and thus their use can be penalized. It's also a central feature of Anderson and Lepore's (2013) "prohibitionist" view.²

- **The abandonment of generics:** According to S. J. Leslie (2017), there is evidence that the use of generics has a tendency to exacerbate various forms of social prejudice (this evidence stems in part from well-established work in psychology showing that generics go hand in hand with essentializing ways of thinking about the world. See, for example, Gelman (2003) for essentializing, and Haslam et al. (2002). In response, prominent authors have suggested that generics be abandoned.
- **The abandonment of terminology associated with mistaken scientific theories:** The history of science is the history of abandoned theories and the accompanying abandonment of failed terminology. Here is an illustration of this phenomenon: after centuries, medicine eventually gave up on the humor theory of illness, so they also abandoned the relevant humor-related terminology.
- **The abandonment of "fish" (and, more generally, explication-related abandonment):** When Carnap outlines his theory of explication, he suggests, for example, that we should abandon "fish" for "piscis" because the latter is better for scientific purposes (see Carnap 1950: ch. 1).
- **The abandonment of "race":** The proposal that we should eliminate thought and talk about race (Appiah 1996; Zack 2002) sets the terms for most recent philosophical discussion of race (e.g., Hardimon 2017; Glasgow et al. 2019).³
- **The abandonment of terms for sex and gender:** There's currently a lively debate about how to classify people using terms that denote sex and gender. Several options are explored in that literature. The dominant views preserve or revise the entrenched terminology ("he," "she," "man," "woman," etc.), or otherwise try to reveal their true meaning. Another option is to abandon all of the existing terms and start over with new terminology.

² The exception is reappropriation. For some recent literature on linguistic reappropriation, see the papers collected in the special issue of *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 97 (1).

³ This is something that it seems the philosophical community, at least as of 2020, would be happy with. A survey conducted of professional philosophers, by the indexing site philpapers.org, revealed that 40 percent would like race categories to be eliminated. (It's worth noting that it's unclear if the folk are coherent as, for another question asking whether race is biological, social, or unreal, a majority (around 63 percent) opted for its being social.) For more information about the survey, consult <https://survey2020.philpeople.org/survey/results/all>.

- **The abandonment of “spirit,” “sin,” “angel,” “devil,” and other religious terminology:** One typical consequence of atheism is the abandonment of terms such as “spirit,” “devil,” “sin,” “angel,” and “god.” I, for example, hardly ever use any of those terms (except as some form of quotation—more on that below).
- **The abandonment of “primitive” and “tribe” in anthropology:** This field has abandoned many concepts that used to be at the core of the discipline, for example “primitive” and, more controversially, “tribe” (see Southall 1970, discussed below).
- **The abandonment of “pro-life” and “pro-choice”:** Those in favor of abortion will advocate for the abandonment of the term “pro-life” to denote those against abortion. Those against abortion will advocate abandonment of the term “pro-choice” to denote those in favor of it. Lakoff’s influential work on framing (2004) is an effort to explain why, and when, we abandon or seek to abandon politically fraught terminology.
- **The abandonment of “retard” in psychology:** In developmental psychology it was standard to refer to people as “retarded” and as “retards” in everyday talk, academia, and law. This way of speaking has now been abandoned (see Ford et al. 2013).⁴
- **The abandonment of “life” in biology:** There’s a longstanding debate in biology about the usefulness of the term “life.” It’s an important everyday notion, but many biologists have suggested that it be abandoned and replaced with different and more scientifically useful notions (Malaterre and Chartier 2019 is a recent work in philosophy on this matter).
- **The abandonment of “health” and “disease” in medicine:** In an influential paper, M. Ereshefsky (2009) has argued that doctors and medical experts should abandon the terms “health” and “disease,” at least when discussing controversial medical cases. Instead, Ereshefsky suggests that “...we should explicitly talk about the considerations that are central in medical discussions, namely, state descriptions and normative claims. As we shall see, using the distinction between state

⁴ One can also note that a central journal in the field, the *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, was formerly known as the *American Journal on Mental Retardation*. Similar points apply to “idiot,” where abandonment in law is pertinent (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idiot#Regional_law).

- descriptions and normative claims avoids the problems facing the major approaches to defining ‘health’ and ‘disease’” (Ereshefsky 2009: 221).
- **The abandonment of moral language—“belief,” “hope” (and “desire,” “concern,” etc.), “concepts,” “fake news,” “intuition,” “assertion,” “semantics-pragmatics,” and much more in philosophy:** One could write an entire history of philosophy focused only on proposals for abandonment. Nietzsche’s criticism of moral concepts can be used as motivation for abandonment of moral language. For a contemporary overview of various motivations for moral abolitionism, see Gardner and Joyce (2019)—a volume of papers devoted entirely to assessing the abolishment of moral language. One of the most influential views of the first half of the twentieth century, logical positivism, was in part a large-scale project of abandonment. Carnap and Ayer, for example, suggested that much of ordinary (and philosophical) language was defective, and thus should be abandoned (Ayer 1936 is a classical formulation). A few recent examples include the Churchlands’ proposal that folk-psychological terminology should be abandoned (Paul Churchland 1981, Patricia Churchland 1986), Edouard Machery’s (2009) suggestion that the concept of “concept” should be abandoned, and Josh Habgood-Cooté’s (2019) arguments for the abandonment of “fake news.” Looking back at my own work, abolitionism seems to have been one of my passions: I’ve argued for the abandonment of “intuition” (Cappelen 2012), “the *de se*” and “first person perspective” (Cappelen and Dever, 2013), “semantics vs. pragmatics” (Cappelen 2007), “ideal vs. non-ideal theory” (Cappelen and Dever 2021), and “assertion” (Cappelen 2012).

These are massively varied cases, but I’ll try to show that they instantiate some common patterns that raise similar challenges. Convincing you of that is dialectically important because it shows that abandoning “democracy” is far from a radical and bizarre proposal. On the contrary, it’s a moderate and sensible continuation of a long and distinguished tradition of abandonment.

Abandonment is an important type of linguistic act. I think of the act of *saying*, and thus also of choosing *what* to say, as central phenomena in philosophy of language and theory of communication more generally. It’s less obvious that the act of deciding to *not* use, that is, abandon, a specific piece of terminology is also an important linguistic act with far-reaching consequences. So understood, the study of abandonment is an instance of a more

general type of research project: the study of the conditions under which a practice should end, how to end it, and the implications of ending it. For example, you can study what happens when people exercise and you can study what happens when people go to war. You can *also* study the conditions under which people stop exercising and stop a war.⁵ You can give arguments for and against abandonment in each case; you can also study the implications of the abandonment. In general, the study of practice abandonment is often as important as the study of the practice. This is the first book-length effort to develop a theory of abandonment of concepts and the linguistic term that expresses them.

Here is the plan for this chapter:

- I first outline the four kinds of arguments for abandonment that I shall focus on: mismatch, verbal disputes, consequentialist arguments, and Can Do Better.
- I then talk about the scope of abandonment, how an abolitionist can talk to, interpret, and otherwise engage constructively with preservationists.
- I outline the relationships between abandonment and some related phenomena: amelioration, replacement, elimination, and reduction.
- Along the way I shall say a bit more about how the process of abandonment can be implemented, and how this process is under our control. I also sketch a new notion of topic continuity that the abolitionist can make use of—a notion that is different from, and improves on, what’s available to those engaged in amelioration.
- Finally, I outline an abolitionist response to a persistent form of whataboutism that often comes up in these discussions. A standard reaction to particular abolitionist proposals is: “Well then, what about this other expression, E—that’s a wonderful expression and if you’re right, it looks like we should abandon that too.” Basically, the reply is that no expressions are wonderful and a lot will depend on the details of particular cases: there’s no simple straightforward move from one abandonment to another.

⁵ And you probably should. The macro-historical theory that goes by the name “imperial overstretch” was made famous by Paul Kennedy (1987), who has it that empires end by overcommitting resources to places they’ve controlled, and one way of doing that is to keep wars going on too long.

Four Arguments for Abandonment

As hinted above, abandonment is a process whereby an expression/concept pair⁶ is used less and less, until eventually it is not used at all. Abandonment is a matter of degree both across a language and for an individual. Typically, it will not be a language-wide phenomenon: some English speakers are abolitionists about religious terminology, while others are preservationists. Abandonment can also vary intra-personally: someone sympathetic to the Churchlands' style of eliminativism can abandon folk-psychological terminology when theorizing about language, but keep it when they are in "non-theoretical contexts." Some people will talk of "spirits" and "karmic energies" when they do yoga, but not in any other context of their life. Such people have abolished "spirits" and "karmic energy" in large parts of their cognitive and conversational lives, but kept them in a quite limited domain (for when they do yoga and talk to others in their yoga community). In sum, abandonment, as I understand it, comes in degrees.

There are two ways to approach abandonment studies: descriptive and normative.

- *Descriptive abandonment studies* aim to describe the various circumstances under which expressions in general tend to be abandoned, and can provide detailed case studies of particular abandonments. Descriptivists will be neutral on the issue of whether the abandonment was good or bad. Their goal is simply to describe and systematize conditions under which abandonment occurs.
- *Normative abandonment studies* aim to provide the normative foundation for abandonment. When is abandonment justified? What are good reasons for abandonment? Should an abandonment be universal or context-specific? In many of the cases where the answer is that large-scale abandonment is justified, there will be little prospect of that actually happening. A clear example that I'll say more about below: racial slurs should be abandoned, but they haven't been and are unlikely to be. That descriptive fact doesn't undermine the normative view. We should abandon offensive racial slurs even if it's extremely unlikely to happen.

⁶ I'll go back and forth between talking about concepts, expressions, and concept-expression pairs. For the most part this is all just shorthand for "an expression in a natural language with its meaning." Talk of concepts should be understood loosely and pre-theoretically. (I don't think there's much non-pre-theoretical [theoretical, let's say] to say about concepts: see Machery et al. (2004), and my Cappelen (2018: 141 ff.)

This book is a contribution to normative abandonment studies. Of course, the normative issues will be based on a careful investigation into the facts about particular expressions, their histories, semantics, pragmatics, and communicative and cognitive effects. So, this is also a descriptive work (with a focus on facts about “democracy”), but the aim is to present arguments in favor of a normative conclusion: the abandonment of “democracy.”

In what follows I outline four kinds of arguments that can be given for abandonment:

- mismatch;
- verbal disputes;
- consequentialist arguments;
- Can Do Better.

In some cases, we find all four defects associated with a particular expression. We then have what I’ll call a Perfect Argument for Abandonment. This isn’t an exhaustive (or non-overlapping) list of conceptual defects or reasons for abandonment. But they are the ones that I will primarily appeal to in my discussion of “democracy” and, interpreted broadly, they are all at the core of many previous abandonment projects.

One more preliminary note before getting to the arguments: most speakers have a high level of confidence that the words they use are healthy and meaningful. They are confident that their reflective conversations with colleagues—both spoken and in print—are exercises in genuine communication. They will strongly resist the suggestion that many of their thoughts, writings, and conversations have been irreparably contaminated by a diseased concept. Resistance will be particularly intense from those who have written books on what they call “democracy,” or devoted parts of their lives to political activism in favor of it. More generally, resistance is to be expected from those who have parts of their professional and personal identities tied up in a concept that ought to be abandoned. However, I hope that such individuals will give the book and its arguments a chance. On balance, abandonment is a positive for them, because a conceptual cleansing will give them an opportunity to start new and improved cognitive and practical lives.

Argument 1: Mismatch

I borrow the term “mismatch arguments” from Ron Mallon, who uses it to describe the views of (time slices of) Kwame Anthony Appiah and Naomi

Zack (Mallon 2006: 533; Appiah 1996; Zack 2002). Mismatch occurs when there's a discrepancy between what the speaker, on reflection, wants to talk about using an expression E, and what E actually picks out (or refers to, or denotes). A mismatch argument has the following form:

Basic structure of mismatch: The actual extension of a term 'T' is E. Speakers who use 'T' don't, on reflection, want to use 'T' to talk about E—they want to use 'T' to talk about something else.

Before going into real life cases below, here are some schematic cases to fix ideas:

- Suppose "N" is a proper name that refers to Bob. Suppose a speaker thinks that "N" refers to someone else, Ted. The speaker uses "N" in a sentence, "N is hungry," meaning to say that Ted is hungry. There's a mismatch between what the speaker intended to say and what she did say. She intended to attribute hunger to Bob, but, because she misunderstood "N," ended up saying something about Ted. That kind of discrepancy (modeled on Kripke's (1977) case) can generate confusion, and makes assessment of the speech act difficult. Suppose Bob (the person she wants to talk about) is hungry, while Ted (the person she semantically speaks about) isn't. What the speaker meant to say is true, but what the speaker said isn't. If the speaker was made aware of this, then she would, on reflection, abandon the use of "N" in this particular context. The case just described involved an individual speaker's mismatch, but it can also happen at a communal level where many or even most individuals in a linguistic community make the same, or similar, mistakes.
- This can happen not just with names. "Periwinkle" denotes a shade of blue (also known as lavender blue). Suppose a speaker wants to talk about a different shade of blue, say ultramarine, but is confused about the meaning of "periwinkle" and uses it to try to denote ultramarine. We then have a mismatch similar to what we had for names above. Again, this could justifiably result in the speaker (contextually) abandoning "periwinkle." If a larger community of speakers made the same mistake, then we would have reason for large-scale (contextual) abandonment.

In what follows, I'll describe various ways in which mismatch can motivate abandonment. I'll start with what's maybe the clearest case of mismatch:

when speakers think that an expression picks something out (a kind of thing, a property, an individual, etc.), but it's as a matter of fact empty, that is, it picks out nothing.

Mismatch: Emptiness

A singular term is empty when it has no denotation (there's nothing it refers to). A predicate is empty when it has an empty extension. This is not always a problem. Suppose A says, "The fence was broken by the sheep that is owned by Harry." If Harry doesn't own a sheep, then "the sheep that is owned by Harry" fails to pick out anything. That, however, is no reason for us to abandon "the," or "sheep," or the entire expression "the sheep that is owned by Harry." That expression is just fine and can be used in other settings to answer important questions about fences, sheep, and other things.

Compare this with the emptiness of 'Vulcan.' Le Verrier suggested that the best explanation of certain features of Mercury's orbiting was the existence of a planet not easily observable by telescopes. He named this planet 'Vulcan.' There was a great deal of interest in Vulcan, but, as we now know, there is no such planet and there are better explanations of Mercury's peculiar orbiting pattern. 'Vulcan,' it turned out, was empty. First note that it is interesting and informative that Vulcan doesn't exist. As a result, the occurrence of 'Vulcan' in a sentence such as 'Vulcan does not exist' is useful, and triggers new insights (even though this phrase is semantically difficult to understand).⁷ However, the discovery also began a gradual abandonment of the expression.⁸ Speakers lost interest in using 'Vulcan' because there was nothing there to talk about. Moreover, to keep using an empty singular term such as 'Vulcan' (outside negative existentials and various forms of quotation) when you know it's empty is linguistically infelicitous, because such usage tends to indicate openness to the idea that the expression is *not* empty.

Religious terminology follows this pattern. Suppose some core religious concepts, for example, "god," "spirit," "angel," and "devil," were introduced in the same clear way as "Vulcan." Suppose, for example, that "god" was introduced to denote "an omnipotent and omniscient being who created

⁷ Sophisticated attempts to give semantics for empty names include Bacon (2013); Sainsbury (2005) is a helpful monograph covering both technical and philosophical aspects of the problem; Piccinini and Scott (2010) is a helpful discussion and overview of pragmatic attempts to accommodate empty names within the sort of Millian framework that underlies this work. Hodgson (forthcoming) contains a nice round-up of the logical space and available positions.

⁸ Note: nothing here will depend on how one thinks about the semantics of empty names. Some of the options are: false, truth-valueless, and gappy propositions. Abandonment considerations will float largely free of such concerns, however: it seems unlikely that anyone would be sufficiently confident about any one of these views to let that move them to abandonment.

the universe.” Suppose also that this is broadly understood and agreed upon by speakers. Then, if the atheist is right, “god” is empty, in the same way that “Vulcan” is. As in the case of “Vulcan,” there’s an interesting negative existential that the atheist will need “god” for—“God does not exist”—which is a claim that theists will strongly disagree with. However, for the atheist, the emptiness of “god” will lead to gradual abandonment. One reason for abandonment is, with the exception of negative existentials (“god doesn’t exist” and a few other cases discussed below), using “god” in a sentence presupposes that the speaker thinks it denotes something; that is, that there is a god. There are also other, more mundane, reasons for the atheist abandoning “god”: there will just be very few interesting questions that require “god” in their answers, nor any question containing “god” that would interest the atheist.

In the cases of “Vulcan” and “god,” those introducing the term did what they were supposed to: they provided a reference-introducing description. That description was well known and agreed on by speakers. However, not all expressions are that lucky. Sometimes the introductory event itself is defective. The expression lacks a semantic foundation because it was never properly introduced. Here are some ways that can happen:

- *The introductory event never happened:* the expression was introduced and never given a meaning. Some of the words in Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” are like that. For example, “Bandersnatch” is not introduced as the name of any particular thing—there was no descriptive introduction, nor have there been efforts to use it later. We can imagine speakers not knowing this and starting to use the expression on the assumption that it had a proper introduction. They would be speaking nonsense. François Recanati⁹ argues that some of the words that Jacques Lacan used were like that: they were nonsense words that Lacan introduced without any proper meaning. The terms were then picked up by Lacan’s students, who used them with deference to Lacan (i.e., they took them to have whatever meaning Lacan gave to them). Since Lacan didn’t give those words any meaning, the students’ speech was meaningless.¹⁰
- *Incoherent introductory event:* in some cases the introductory event happened, but was defective. Maybe, for example, several people were

⁹ Recanati (1997) quasi-formalizes this idea by means of a deference operator σ . A student of Lacan would utter things like “ σ ‘the unconscious is structured like a language’” where σ maps a (mentalese) sentence to what Lacan means by that sentence.

¹⁰ What’s important here is that this could be true. Whether it is true or not is very difficult to find out now.

involved, and there was no agreement on what the expression should mean. Some thought it should pick out the Fs, while others involved thought it should pick out the Gs, and the two introductory events were never reconciled. Josh Habgood-Coote (2019) argues that something along these lines happened for “fake news,” and that it should therefore be abandoned.

- *Demonstrative introduction via defective samples*: some expressions are introduced through samples. The introduction takes the form, “Let ‘F’ denote *that* kind of thing,” where some samples are pointed out. In some cases, the samples will have little or nothing in common, and so they don’t constitute a kind. If so, we have a failed demonstrative introduction. In earlier work (Cappelen 2012), I have argued that “intuition” might be exactly like that.

Examples of Emptiness Used as a Reason for Abandonment

Philosophy is packed with arguments that use emptiness to justify abandonment. The Churchlands (1981, 1986) argue that folk-psychological concepts are empty, and so should be abandoned. In a couple of recent papers, Habgood-Coote (2019, 2022) has argued that the concept of “fake news” should be abandoned because it is empty, owing to its lacking a coherent semantic foundation. Cappelen and Dever (2013) have argued that concepts such as “the de se” and “the first person perspective” should be abandoned because they fail to pick out anything.

Arguments for and against abandonment play an important role in the literature on “race.” Some of these arguments go straight from emptiness to abandonment. That, for example, is how the case for abandonment is set out in the introduction to Hardimon’s (non-eliminativist) book *Rethinking Race*. He writes that eliminativism consists in the claims that:

- (i) The word ‘race’ and the concept race as applied to human beings should be eliminated from our vocabulary.
- (ii) The biological category or kind race as applied to human beings should be eliminated from our ontology. (Hardimon 2017: 3)

In Hardimon’s own words:

eliminativists’ basic reason for removing race from our ontology is empirical. Science, they claim, has shown that human races do not exist. There are no races. Just as we have jettisoned the kind phlogiston from our

ontology, so too—and for the same reason—we should jettison the kind race. As for the elimination of the word and concept, the first reason eliminativists give is semantic (in the philosophers’ sense of the word): the word and concept do not refer. ‘Race’ and race are “vacuous” or “empty.” There are no races. (Hardimon 2017: 4)

That argument form is often found outside philosophy as well (and so isn’t the result of a specific view in philosophy of language or philosophy of mind). A paper by the anthropologist Aiden Southall, “The Illusion of Tribe” (1970), provides a good illustration. Southall argues that the concept of “tribe” should be abandoned, and he proposes a strategy for amelioration. There are several strands of argument in Southall’s paper—and so it serves as an illustration of several of the types of argument in this book. I’ll return to this paper as an illustration repeatedly. Here is Southall’s initial stab at an argument for emptiness:

Controversial though the matter is, the most generally acceptable characteristics of a tribal society are perhaps that it is a whole society, with a high degree of self-sufficiency at a near subsistence level, based on a relatively simple technology without writing or literature, politically autonomous and with its own distinctive language, culture and sense of identity, tribal religion being also coterminous with tribal society.

(Southall 1970: 28)

Southall then asks, “. . . to what extent do such societies still exist?” He points out that they can’t exist, because there are no areas of the inhabited earth unclaimed by one sovereign state or another. He goes on to argue that the other characteristics don’t go together in any particular instances—and so there’s nothing there. So, he concludes, this is the beginning of an argument for the abandonment of “tribe.”

Mismatch: Overgeneration and Undergeneration

Recall that a mismatch argument has the following form:

Basic structure of mismatch: The actual extension of ‘T’ is E. Speakers who use ‘T’ don’t, on reflection, want to use ‘T’ to talk about E—they want to use ‘T’ to talk about something else.

But we can now be more precise. Mismatch comes in two forms:

- *Undergeneration mismatch*: few of the things speakers, on reflection, want to talk about using “F” are in the extension of F. Emptiness is an instance of undergeneration.
- *Overgeneration mismatch*: the extension of “F” contains many things that speakers, on reflection, don’t want to talk about.

Undergeneration and overgeneration are not intrinsically problematic. If there are more objects in the extension of “gorillas” than we thought, that’s great—we want there to be more gorillas because they are almost extinct. If there are fewer people in the extension of “serial killer” than expected, that’s awesome because we don’t want there to be many serial killers around. The problem arises when the mismatch is between what the expression picks out and what speakers, on reflection, want to talk about. Here’s a diagnostic test—the “Is this what you want to talk about?” test:

The ‘Is this what you want to talk about?’ test: We tell speakers what, as a matter of fact, is in the extension of F, and then ask them: Is this what you want to talk about? If the answer, on reflection, is ‘no,’ we have a defeasible reason for abandonment.

Here is an example of how mismatch can be used as an argument for abandonment.¹¹ Again, I’ll use “race” as an example. In his 2006 paper, Mallon outlines the following argument in favor of abandonment of “race”:

Mismatch Arguments used for ‘race’: A mismatch argument holds that the true account of the extension of a term or concept x would be sharply different from what is believed about the extension of x. In this case of race, Appiah (1996) and Zack (2002) think that the fact of the absence of reproductive isolation among major racial groups (as identified in ordinary discourse) would result in none of them being races (in the sense of being biological populations). Thus, if we allowed that the term ‘race’ does pick out biological populations, it would turn out that none of the groups

¹¹ For more on the mismatch argument, including references, see Glasgow et al. (2019: 120 and n. 8).

commonsensically considered races are races. Conversely, other groups that are not thought of as races (e.g., Appiah suggests the Amish, and Zack, Irish Protestants) might count as races. *Because such a mismatch would frustrate the ordinary intentions guiding the use of racial terms, a mismatch argument might support the abandonment of such terms. Let's call a situation in which the actual extension of a term is sharply at odds with its putative extension an extensional mismatch.* Appiah and Zack thus endorse extensional mismatch arguments.

(Mallon 2006: 533; italics added)

If this argument is correct, the meaning of the term “race” doesn’t pick out what speakers want to talk about. Moreover, and worse still, it actually picks out some things they don’t want to talk about. That’s a good reason to stop using the term; that is, a good reason for abandonment. This is not to deny that *in some cases*, if the speech community agrees that a term T should have a new meaning, S, that will, at least over time, make it the case that T means S. However, that will require coordination and some kind of agreement, and in the cases where both things are absent, there’s a strong pull towards abandonment.

Mismatch arguments will typically be inconclusive because we have no commonly agreed methodology for determining semantic content or speaker meaning. In each particular case, a lot will depend on details like historical facts, facts about speech patterns, and speakers’ intentions—most of which are in large part inaccessible to us. Even in the relatively simple cases, say “red,” there’s not much agreement on exactly how to characterize the intension, how to deal with borderline cases, etc. In complex cases, such as “race,” there’s a lack of clear methodology for settling semantic issues. As a result, any claim about emptiness and mismatch can be met with a pressure to explore the data further: maybe eventually we’ll find out that there isn’t real mismatch. This is one way to read the literature on “race”: some of the alternatives to Appiah’s view are arguing that there are ways to understand “race” that support a version of the biological view (Glasgow et al. 2019). Moreover, even if there is agreement that the mismatch is real, it’s not always clear that abandonment is the right reaction. Another option, much discussed recently and the topic of Cappelen (2018), is that of keeping the lexical item and revising the meaning so that there’s no longer a mismatch. This strategy can be modeled on what has happened with expressions like “family,” “marriage,” “meat,” and on what some people have proposed should

happen for gender terms. It's also a strategy that has been proposed for "race." In these cases, the lexical item has been preserved, and the meaning has been changed to better fit what speakers want to talk about.¹² The question of how to adjudicate between abandonment and amelioration will be addressed below.

With those reservations in mind, mismatch can, in some cases, be a significant consideration in favor of abandonment, and I'll argue later in this book that "democracy" is one such case.

Argument 2: Verbal Disputes

If an expression gives rise to extensive verbal disputes, that's a consideration in favor of abandonment of that expression. I'll distinguish three kinds of verbal disputes:

Semantic-based verbal dispute: When two speakers use the same expression, S, with different semantic contents, p₁ and p₂, but are unaware of this difference, and their disagreement stems from that ignorance.

Speaker-meaning-based verbal dispute: In some cases, the source of the verbal dispute is not in the difference in actual semantic content between the two utterances (as it is in the semantic-based notion). Instead, it's in what the speakers take themselves to have said (or what they had in mind when speaking, or what they *think* is the semantic content of their utterances). Schematically: A utters 'S,' while B utters 'not-S.' A thinks that what she said when uttering 'S' is p, and B think that what she said when uttering 'S' is p*, where p and p* are not incompatible. A and B, however, are unaware of their different beliefs about what's been said in uttering 'S,' and think they are disagreeing. Their dispute is pointless, and could be easily resolved if they knew what the other speaker took herself to have said.¹³

¹² This is, of course, a central theme in the burgeoning conceptual engineering literature; as I point out, many extant conceptual engineering projects can be seen as adopting this strategy. Recent literature has discussed the viability and desirability of doing so, and raised worries, such as Strawson's objection (so named in Cappelen (2018), Prinzing (2018), Simion (2018), and Nado (2019), among many others; see Sterken (2020) for a contrarian take on the worry), according to which changing meaning while retaining the same word is liable to lead to misunderstandings, and the more fundamental implementation problem about how would-be ameliorators can make such changes to public languages over which they have little to no control (Riggs 2019, Jorem 2021, Pinder 2021, among many others).

¹³ Semantic- and speaker-meaning-based verbal disputes correspond roughly to what David Chalmers (2011) calls narrow vs. broad verbal disputes. Chalmers's version of the

Verbal disputes without content: Some terms mean nothing, but speakers think that they mean something. Suppose E is such a term. Suppose A makes a claim involving E, ‘Es are F,’ and then B denies it, saying, “No, Es are not F.” A and B might think E means the same thing. This would then be not a semantic-based verbal dispute, nor a speaker-meaning-based verbal dispute. Nonetheless, we should see this as an instance of the same phenomenon. A and B take themselves to be in disagreement, but that is an illusion, and thus their interaction is pointless.

The notion of a verbal dispute is difficult to articulate in non-controversial terms, in large part because there’s no non-controversial account of the connections between semantics, meaning, speaker intentions, what speakers say, and related phenomena. That, however, should not stop us from making use of what is an important notion with significant practical applications. Verbal disputes of the kind just described are not just pointless (although they can be pointless too—as Chalmers repeatedly points out). They are also significant impediments to intellectual progress and practical rationality. When a group of thinkers wastes time trying to resolve verbal disputes, they will fail to make substantive progress, and thus their intellectual resources are being misused. When verbal disputes enter into practical decision-making, the result is not just theoretical pointlessness but also potential failures of collective action: A says, “Let’s do X,” and B says, “Yes, doing X is an excellent idea,” but if their agreement is merely verbal and they mean different things by “X,” then they are likely to have a collective action problem, and they may end up doing different things.

I don’t have a simple protocol for how to discover the presence of a verbal dispute. However, in some cases, what the speaker thinks she said in uttering S is relatively easy to discover, because she explicitly tells us what she wants “S” to mean. This is often the case in theoretical work. Many papers on “democracy” start with a definition of that term. When a speaker starts a paper by saying, “In this paper I want to use E to mean M,” then we have good evidence that the speaker wants their use of E to be interpreted as M. If two speakers have different definitions, and one says “Democracy is F,” and the other says “Democracy is not F,” we have good reason to think that they are not in genuine disagreement (since their definitions of “democracy” differ).

speaker-meaning-based notion of a verbal dispute is this: “A dispute over S is (broadly) verbal when for some expression T in S, the parties disagree about the meaning of T, and the dispute over S arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement regarding T.”

Examples of Verbal Disputes

How much of intellectual debate consists, at least in part, of pointless verbal disputes? One influential philosopher, As mentioned in the introduction, David Chalmers, has argued that almost all of the following questions are "... beset by verbal disputes, in a fashion that is occasionally but too rarely recognized":

What is free will? What is knowledge? What is justification? What is justice? What is law? What is confirmation? What is causation? What is color? What is a concept? What is meaning? What is action? What is life? What is logic? What is self-deception? What is group selection? What is science? What is art? What is consciousness? And indeed: What is a verbal dispute? (Chalmers 2011: 531–2)

If the debates over these questions have been in large part pointless (which they would have been if they're beset by verbal disputes), that would be a sad indictment of the history of philosophy. But so far, this is just a claim in need of extensive textual evidence. For Chalmers to substantiate this charge, he would have to show that actual participants in these philosophical debates thought that their words meant different things, and that this difference was the source of their dispute. He doesn't try to do that, and it would be difficult to do so: we would need to know what they thought their words meant when they were writing or speaking particular sentences. That kind of evidence is hard to find. Nonetheless, Chalmers does suggest a procedure for diagnosing the presence of verbal disputes—the method of elimination:

...one eliminates use of the key term, and one attempts to determine whether any substantive dispute remains. To apply this method to a dispute over a sentence *S* that is potentially verbal with respect to term *T*, one proceeds as follows. First: one bars the use of term *T*. Second: one tries to find a sentence *S* 0 in the newly restricted vocabulary such that the parties disagree nonverbally over *S* 0, and such that the disagreement over *S* 0 is part of the dispute over *S*. Third: If there is such an *S* 0, the dispute over *S* is not wholly verbal, or at least there is a substantive dispute in the vicinity. If there is no such *S* 0, then the dispute over *S* is wholly verbal....

(Chalmers 2011: 527)

Note that the method of elimination is a form of abandonment: the restricted vocabulary has abandoned the disputed term. Having moved to

the restricted vocabulary, it will be natural to stay there, and more generally to shun the potentially confusing expression.

If we notice that an expression is the source of massive amounts of destructive verbal disputes, that's a reason for not using that expression. The following situation makes a strong case for abandonment:

Unfixable source of verbal disputes: Suppose that E is used extensively in theoretical work, and that those who use it stipulate a large number of different meanings (i.e., they define E in different ways). If they systematically forget about this variation, both in their own work and when they discuss each other's work, then we have a reason to abandon that expression. In some such cases, E might be a permanent source of verbal disputes because there are already millions of preserved tokens of E that are used with different meanings—and those tokens will not go away. They have the potential to affect communication and intellectual work indefinitely. In such cases, we have a very strong case for abandonment.

Democracy, I'll argue, is like this: an unfixable source of verbal disputes.

Argument 3: Consequentialist Arguments for Abandonment

The third kind of argument often used in favor of abandonment is very open-ended: *a term's use has some kinds of negative effects that can be ameliorated by abandonment.*¹⁴ Arguments for abandonment are often accompanied by the claim that the terms in question generate cognitive bias and distort thinking in ways that have negative effects. There are many kinds of negative effects and many ways to classify them. To make this relatively simple, I'll focus on just a few dimensions:

- effects on speaker—think of these as broadly cognitive and emotional;
- effects on audience—again, these can be both cognitive and emotional;
- effects on people other than the speaker or audience, and on larger social, political, and theoretical structures.

¹⁴ Having a tendency to generate verbal disputes is one instance of this, so, in a sense, Argument 2 is an instance of Argument 3.

Some initial, simple examples: suppose “Barky” is the name of a dog that just died, and that hearing the name makes Bobby extremely sad. The sadness that results from uttering “Barky” in front of Bobby is an example of a negative consequence that doesn’t fall into semantics or pragmatics, as normally construed. There’s nothing semantically wrong with “Barky,” but the consequences are negative for a certain subset of the audience. The kind thing to do is to abandon “Barky” when Bobby is around.

One impact of utterances of slurs is various kinds of negative effects on audiences and speakers. Just how to characterize these negative effects is tricky, but their existence is indisputable. One reason there’s broad agreement about the desirability of abandoning the “N-word” is that the effects of its use are negative in many diverse and difficult-to-understand ways. This is a point made especially clearly by Robin Jeshion (2020) in a recent article on the varieties of pejoratives (from swear words to slurs and beyond). Having noted that they come in many different kinds that defy easy classification, she then tells us:

What does unite [all pejorative words], however, is that they are the tools – for some of them, the weapons – of pejorative utterances insofar as they are commonly used to degrade, diminish, insult, mock, and so forth, often in highly specific ways.

Examples could be multiplied, and I’m not making any particularly sophisticated point: uses of words can not only make people feel bad but also have negative effects on social structures.

A lot of political terminology is chosen in order to trigger associations and emotions that are helpful for those who advocate a certain view. The expression “pro-life” is used by those who oppose the legalization of abortion. The use of that terminology to denote their political movement and views has significant cognitive and emotive effects. If those who are pro-abortion were to adopt this way of speaking, they would have to refer to their views as “against life,” with the accompanying horrific associations. As a result, those advocating for abortion have abandoned the “pro-life” terminology, and instead use terms such as “pro-choice.” Of course, from the point of view of those who want more restricted abortion laws, the “pro-choice” terminology has negative effects: they don’t think of their views as being opposed to humans having choices, or as advocating for a general anti-choice view. Both parties of the debate abandon the other’s terminology because it has negative consequences for their respective movements.

Negative cognitive consequences also cover diverse phenomena. A lot of what Carnap says about explication is most naturally interpreted as proposals for how we should abandon ordinary-language expressions in favor of improved concepts. The arguments for abandonment are, at least in part, that it will have positive effects on theorizing. If we try to build theories using ordinary-language expressions, the results will be theories that are inferior to those built using improved concepts. Looking at more or less any scientific discipline, this is obviously a broadly shared view. Theory building is, in large part, also concept building, and as such it requires the development of improved theoretical vocabulary.

Here's a recent example from philosophy of an appeal to negative theoretical consequences. Josh Habgood-Coote (2019) argues that we should abandon the concept of "fake news." Toward the end of that paper, Habgood-Coote appeals to the negative cognitive and political effects of having the concept:

'fake news' ... functions to appeal to classic enlightenment ideals—truth, a free marketplace of ideas, and objective journalism—whilst at the same time working to undermine those very ideals, both by weakening public trust in (reasonably) trustworthy news institutions, and by making it difficult to have a reasonable debate about whether news claims are true. This is part of a wider trend on the right whereby (typically misplaced) claims to rationality and critical thinking are used by right-wing figures to spread antidemocratic ideology. (Habgood-Coote 2019: 1053)

Similar arguments have been made for a whole class of expressions, namely generics. A famous paper by Sarah-Jane Leslie, after reviewing the extensive psychological evidence that shows we tend to misreason using generics, for instance by buying into a false, essentialist view of a range of social kinds (and the behavior thus expected of members of that kind), notes:

Instead of labeling a person as a Muslim, we might instead describe the person—if needed—as, say, a person who follows Islam, emphasizing that person is the relevant kind sortal and that following Islam is a particular property that the individual happens to possess...the evidence suggests that the use of labels and generics contributes to essentialization.

(Leslie 2008: 37–8)¹⁵

¹⁵ In the same vein, Anderson, Haslanger, and Langton (2012) argue that, "If a characteristic racial generic is asserted, it should be rejected, because it is false, and also politically problematic: it presents social artifact as racial essence" (765).

In a similar spirit, the first sentence of a recent paper by Leshin, Leslie, and Rhodes (2020) tells us that “a problematic way to think about social categories is to essentialize them – to treat particular differences between people as marking fundamentally distinct social kinds.” After presenting the results of a study that suggests that generic language promotes essentializing beliefs, they conclude that “avoiding generic language may be one way to limit the spread of essentialist beliefs.” While not dispositive (see McKeever and Sterken 2021 for an overview of the pro- and con-debate here), this work suggests that abandoning generics may improve our lives both cognitively and morally.

As mentioned, this applies in disciplines beyond philosophy. In 2007, the Association of Social Anthropologists condemned the use of “primitive” and “stone age,” and supported a campaign by Survival International challenging the use of those terms. Here is telling a passage from their campaign:

Terms like ‘stone age’ and ‘primitive’ have been used to describe tribal people since the colonial era, reinforcing the idea that they have not changed over time and that they are backward. This idea is both incorrect and very dangerous. It is incorrect because all societies adapt and change, and it is dangerous because it is often used to justify the persecution or forced ‘development’ of tribal peoples. The results are almost always catastrophic: poverty, alcoholism, prostitution, disease and death.¹⁶

I don’t know that this is a correct description of the consequences of using terms like “stone age” and “primitive,” but if it is correct, we have a broadly consequentialist argument for abandonment.

Argument 4: Can Do Better

I come now to the final type of argument in favor of abandonment. Many of those who advocate for the abandonment of a particular expression complement their negative arguments with positive proposals for how to do better, in something like the following way:

Capturing ameliorated speakers’ communicative intention: When speakers use a defective term, E, there might be ways to better express what they

¹⁶ https://www.anthropologi.info/blog/anthropology/2006/is_this_anthropology_african_pygmies_obs.

wanted to say. To better understand this proposal, we first need to broaden our notion of ‘what the speaker wanted to say’ beyond the disquotational (whereby what A meant to say by uttering ‘S’ is that S). One way to do this is counterfactually: if the speaker had recognized the deficiencies of E, and was asked to improve on her speech act without using E, what would she say?

In some of the cases I’ll talk about later in this book, the answer to that is fairly straightforward: the relevant authors have defined the relevant term, and thus provided us with a description of what they mean by it. In those cases, the improved communicative intentions would be approximated by replacing the definiendum with the definition. In other cases, we could provide the speaker with various possible definitions and see which one they would choose.

Here are three more illustrations of how we can capture improved speaker intentions in this way, exemplified with “fish,” “intuition,” and “fake news.”

In at least some passages where Carnap talks about explication, explication is a form of abandonment. In connection with the abandonment of “fish” in favor of “piscis” (in scientific contexts), Carnap (1950: 5) says:

The former concept has been succeeded by the latter in this sense: the former is no longer necessary in scientific talk; most of what previously was said with the former can now be said with the help of the latter (though often in a different form, not by simple replacement).

[Emphasis mine]

Again, “what was said using ‘fish’ can now be said using ‘piscis’” can be understood as counterfactual amelioration: speakers would consider the statement that uses “piscis” to be an improvement on what they said, had they known about the deficiencies of “fish” and the advantages of “piscis.”

In earlier work I argued for the abandonment of “intuition,” and I made suggestions for how speakers could do better. One such suggestion is that, instead of using the defective terms “intuition” and “intuitive,” philosophers and others can use “pre-theoretic.” If one can abandon the supposedly theoretically rich “intuition” for “pre-theoretic,” then that suggests that passages appealing to “intuition” don’t in fact require commitment to intuitions as important posits. To illustrate this point, I showed how one can replace salient uses of “intuition” in analytic philosophy with “pre-theoretic.”¹⁷

¹⁷ For example, consider the following passage from Kripke, where the square brackets are my addition, showing the dispensability of intuition talk: “Although the idea is now a familiar one, I will give a brief restatement of the idea of rigid designation, and the intuition [pre-theoretic view] about names that underlies it” (Cappelen 2012: 73, quoting Kripke 1980: 6).

Finally, consider again Josh Habgood-Coote on how to do better than “fake news”:

We already have plenty of words for talking about deceit, miscommunication, and epistemic dysfunctions. We can talk about lies, misleading, bullshitting, false assertion, false implicature, being unreliable, distorting the facts, being biased, propaganda, and so on. These terms have perfectly good meanings in ordinary language. We might think we can describe our current predicament perfectly adequately using these terms. (2018: 15)

If you’re an advocate of abandonment with respect to “fake news” (and I agree with Habgood-Coote that there are good reasons to be), one argument in favor of this position is that we can do better. Habgood-Coote suggests that speakers can do better using alternative terminology—“distorting the facts,” “being unreliable,” etc. The sense of “doing better” is not easy to make precise: the speakers had intentions that centered on “fake news,” so we need to think of how their intentions can be improved. The suggestion here is that this is a counterfactual notion, spelled out in terms of what the speaker would say, had they decided to abandon “fake news”: that is, in terms of their improved communicative intentions.

In some cases, there’s no room for improvement. Atheists have abandoned “god” and think it is empty. The main goal of the speech acts involving it was to talk about the presumed denotation. Having found out that there is no denotation, there’s no better way to say what one attempted to say. We’ll just talk about other things. We’ll ask the same questions, for example, why did such and such happen? Why is it immoral to do such and such? But for most abolitionists about “god,” there’s no “better way to say what they tried to say” using that term. The same applies to slurs: no one is trying to preserve the speech act of slurring by doing it in a better way.¹⁸

The Perfect Argument for Abandonment

That completes my outline of the four main arguments in favor of abandonment. None of these arguments is foolproof, nor easy to establish. For each argument there will be significant room for doubt. Similarly, whenever

¹⁸ Reappropriating slurs doesn’t count because in (appropriately) using a reappropriated slur, one isn’t slurring.

there's a claim that a particular philosophical dispute is purely verbal, there will be resistance (evidenced by the fact that neither Chalmers's negative nor positive proposal has had much traction). Claims about negative consequences often involve complex empirical assumptions. Claims about doing better often make dubious assumptions about what counts as "better," and whether we can actually do the same thing better, or are just doing something else.

With all those qualifications in mind, there can be very strong evidence in favor of abandonment. The best arguments for abandonment combine the strategies outlined above. In some cases—I'll argue that "democracy" is one of them—the four argumentative strategies converge:

- I. Significant mismatch.
- II. Generates extensive verbal disputes.
- III. Is used in ways that have significant negative consequences.
- IV. We can do better.

The presence of all four is the strongest case for abandonment. I'll call this the Perfect Argument. Of course, no argument is perfect, but this is about as good as it gets in case you are looking for reasons to abandon. Given what I said above, we have to think of perfection here as being highly sensitive to context: what's perfect in one context might not be in another. What's a defect in one context might not be in another (very simple case: if you know that hearing the name "Barky" makes Bobby sad, then that counts against uttering the word "Barky" *when Bobby is around*). Whether we can do better will depend on the speaker, the audience, and what they are up to.

3

Abandonment Compared to Elimination, Reduction, Replacement, and Amelioration

Abandonment is different from some related phenomena that often go under the labels “elimination,” “reduction,” “replacement,” and “amelioration.” In what follows, I’ll discuss these in turn.

Abandonment Compared to Elimination and Reduction

In the philosophy of science and metaphysics, the notions of *reduction* and *elimination* (and *eliminativism*) play important roles. The connection between them is confusing, and in part a choice of terminology. In their discussion of scientific reduction, van Riel and Van Gulick write:

Reductivists are generally realists about the reduced phenomena, and their views are in that respect *conservative*. They are committed to the reality of the reducing base, and thus to the reality of whatever reduces to that base. If thoughts reduce to brain states and brain states are real, then so too are thoughts. Though conservative realism is the norm, some reductionists take a more anti-realist view. In such cases, the reducing phenomena are taken to replace the prior phenomena, which are in turn *eliminated*. The idea of mental illness as a type of psycho-neural disorder replaces the idea of demon possession. Demons and their voices have no role or reality in the new theory. (van Riel and Van Gulick 2019: section 1)

No matter how one understands these notions, they are independent of abandonment:

You could have reduction and elimination without abandonment, because even though brain states could explain headaches, it might still be useful to use the expression “headache” in most contexts.

- Moral error theorists who are fictionalists deny the existence of moral facts (states of affairs, etc.), but advocate for the continued use of moral terminology (i.e., against abandonment). They think that a pretense-use of moral vocabulary is better than abandonment (Kalderon 2005 and Nolan, Restall, and West 2005 are the main proponents here).
- We can have abandonment without reduction or elimination. There has been no elimination or reduction of that guy I mentioned at the beginning, Archibald Stansted Hall, but “Archibald Stansted Hall” has still been abandoned. The slur “gugu,” just to randomly pick one, has been abandoned, but that abandonment hasn’t been accompanied by a reduction or elimination like the attempted reduction of headache to brain state. We don’t take anything new and different to play the role, metaphysically or linguistically, that “gugu” (or uses of it) did; we just don’t use it anymore.

Here’s one way to summarize this: the expressions “reduction” and “elimination” have been used extensively in philosophy, and have traditionally been tied closely together. There are strong metaphysical assumptions built into most uses of “elimination.” Abandonment is independent of those assumptions, but some instances of reduction or elimination can lead to abandonment.¹

Abandonment Compared to Replacement

“Replacement” is another piece of terminology that picks out a phenomenon that is different from, but in the neighborhood of, abandonment. Kevin Scharp’s work on “truth,” in particular his book *Replacing Truth*, is a paradigm of the replacement strategy (see Scharp 2013). More generally, it sometimes feels natural to talk about replacing one piece of terminology with another. It’s a constant temptation when talking about abandonment and arguments such as Can Do Better: to do better can easily be construed

¹ Irvine and Sprevak (2020) use “discourse eliminativism” for a view very close to what I here call “abandonment.”

as replacing the old term with a new and improved one. Despite how natural it is to talk in this way, I think it's problematic and I ultimately reject it.

Replacement theories rely on what I'll call "replacement structure":

Replacement structure: There's something, S, that contains another thing, T, and then a third thing, R, takes T's place in S.

I don't see how replacement theorists can fill in S, T, and R in a plausible way. There's a literal sense of replacement where S is the past sentences containing, say, "truth," R is, say, "ascending truth," and the activity of replacement is literal: you go back to all those old sentences and erase "true," then pencil in "ascending truth" or "descending truth." That, of course, would be silly, and it's not what Scharp or any other replacement theorists have in mind. Nor is the idea that there are some possible future sentences in which we replace "truth" with "ascending truth" or "descending truth." This doesn't work, because discourse involving "truth" isn't preserved sentence by sentence. Go back to the replacement structure: there's no stable S, because the sentences that were to be produced (if we were to not use "truth," but instead "truth_a" and "truth_d") are different from those that would be produced were we to continue using "truth."

One option is to think of S as a functional role. A replacement theorist will accept the idea that concepts perform functions and have roles to play. These roles might be semantic, inferential, communicative, cognitive, social, or some combination of those. If, say, "truth" has such a function (or plays such a role), then a replacement concept must occupy a very similar functional role.

Replacement so understood (i.e., relying on an appeal to roles or functions) is not the same as abandonment. Let's pretend at first that this talk of "functions" is well defined (for reasons I give below, I don't think it is). So we have an expression, E, that has some function F. The T abolitionist will typically believe one of two things. First option: the abolitionist denies that there is an F; that is, there's only the illusion of a function associated with T. A potential illustration of this first option would be terms that mean nothing or are simply gibberish. Second option: the abolitionist agrees that T has function F, but argues that F should be abandoned; that is, nothing should perform function F. Maybe the easiest way to understand this latter option is to think about slurs: suppose there's a function they perform. The slur-abolitionist doesn't want that function to be performed by some other lexical item(s). They want *nothing* to perform the function. Same goes for the atheist with respect to "god": they don't want some expression other than "god" to perform the "god" function. They want the function gone.

In the previous paragraph, I took seriously the idea that there's a well-defined notion of "function" that replacement theorists can operate with. But that was just for the sake of argument. In earlier work, I criticized that idea (see Cappelen 2018). There's now extensive literature on how conceptual engineers should understand the idea of linguistic and conceptual functions (see, for example, Thomasson 2020, Nado 2019). Suffice it to say that the abolitionist doesn't need to take a stand on that idea. Nothing in the abolitionist framework requires an appeal to functions, and so they can remain neutral on that entire debate.

Abandonment Compared to Amelioration

I'll use the expression "amelioration" to describe cases where a lexical item is preserved while its meaning undergoes change. My earlier work on conceptual engineering (Cappelen 2018) focused primarily on such cases. Suppose the term "mother of x" was at some point restricted to instances where there was a biological relationship between two people. We now use "mother" in a broader sense: it denotes relationships where the biological tie is absent. If you think that's a better meaning for "mother," then you think its meaning has been ameliorated. The amelioration has happened without abandoning the lexical item "mother."

Things could have gone differently. The term "mother" could have kept the biocentric meaning, and new terminology could have been introduced to designate a relationship that describes a similar social/historical/legal relationship minus the biological component.² Alternatively, the entire old classificatory system—"mother," "father," "son," "daughter," "cousin," etc.—could have been abandoned. This would be a radical abandonment of the framework for thinking about the significant attachments that people have to each other. It could be motivated by this thought: the old terminology made us focus on and care about primitive biological relationships that should be ignored and abandoned. This would be the beginning of a consequentialist argument for the abandonment of biocentric-family terminology. Such an argument would be justified by the hypothesis that this terminology was morally suspect, socially unhelpful, and overall detrimental to human

² This passage should be read as neutral on the question of what "mother" really means—maybe it always had the broader meaning. The assumptions made here are for illustrative purposes only, and I do not mean to take a stand on the semantic value of "mother" over time.

well-being. If reflecting on familial classifications led you to that view, you'd be inclined toward abandonment rather than amelioration.

One of the issues I'll return to repeatedly is how to assess the choice between amelioration and abandonment. There's no algorithm for how to make that choice, and a lot will depend on details of particular cases. However, one consideration that in general should speak in favor of abandonment is what I'll call *repeated and inconsistent failed efforts to ameliorate*. If there have been many different efforts to ameliorate E, where these efforts are inconsistent (i.e., they can't all be the new meaning of E), and these efforts have all repeatedly failed, then we should consider abandonment for two reasons. First, it's easier—it does not require changing the meaning of an established expression. Second, the disagreeing parties can then each have a word that means what they wanted the original expression to mean. The insistence on keeping a lexical item seems to be unnecessarily conservative, and also an unnecessary effort to exploit associations, feelings, and memories attached to it.

The situation described above (with repeated inconsistent failed efforts to ameliorate) is also likely to lead to mismatch and verbal disputes: we have some speakers who want to use E with extension e1, while other speakers want to use it with e2, etc. The expression can, as a matter of fact, have at most one of those extensions. So there will be a great deal of mismatch. When there is a great deal of varied mismatch (i.e., different mismatches for different speakers), then there are also likely to be verbal disputes. If, in this situation, it is easy to do better by using other terminology (where doing better is measured by how speakers see their own communicative success), then we have an even stronger case for abandonment.

There are two other important advantages of abandonment over amelioration that I shall say a bit more about: topic continuity, and implementation and control.

Topic Continuity

The ameliorative tradition in philosophy has triggered an extensive literature on Strawson's challenge: how can we preserve a topic when the meaning of a term changes over time, as it is supposed to do in successful cases of amelioration? Why, asks Strawson (1963), haven't we just changed the topic? The response to this challenge comes in three forms: (i) it's a bad challenge and doesn't require an answer; (ii) we can give an account of continuity;

(iii) there can be no continuity, and amelioration inevitably leads to verbal disputes and change of topic. For some discussion of this debate see Prinzing 2018; Cappelen 2020b; Haslanger 2020; Knoll forthcoming; Sterken 2020; Sundell 2020; Huetter-Almerigi 2022. The issue of topic continuity doesn't arise in the same way for abolitionists as it does for ameliorators. In abandoning "humors," we have also abandoned the topic of humors. The issue of continuity doesn't arise. If you think about Archibald Stansted Hall as a topic (as he no doubt was while alive), that topic has been abandoned, and that abandonment corresponds to the abandonment of "Archibald Stansted Hall."

However, and this is important, we can now see that there's an alternative (and complementary) way to think about topic continuity. In some cases, the questions that triggered further questions in which the abandoned expressions occurred will remain. The question "Why do people get sick?" is still pressing for us. The expression "humors" doesn't occur in any of the related questions we now take seriously, but there's a sense in which we can identify a sense of continuity of inquiry that's independent of the continuity of lexical items:

Continuity of inquiry through continuity of questions: Continuous efforts to answer a set of questions, Q, constitute continuity in Q-Inquiry.

All cases of abandonment imply the end of some inquiries, that is, the end of efforts to answer some questions. When "Archibald Stansted Hall" was abandoned, all the questions containing "Archibald Stansted Hall" were also abandoned. For example, no one continued trying to answer questions such as:

How did Archibald Stansted Hall die?
Where does Archibald Stansted Hall live?

The abandonment of "Archibald Stansted Hall" implies the abandonment of these questions. Those lines of inquiry have come to an end. The same goes for a number of lines of inquiry relating to "humors." Questions like:

"What combination of humors leads to diarrhea?"
"What do the humors smell like?"
"Where do the humors come from?"

have been abandoned as a corollary of the humor-terminology abandonment. However, many of the important questions that had answers in which the expression "humor" occurred persist. For example:

Why do people get diarrhea?
How do we cure diarrhea?

We still try to answer those questions, but our answers don't contain "humor" or "humor"-related terminology (such as "yellow bile," "black bile," etc.). In this way, we can identify a form of continuity in inquiry that persists after terminological abandonment.

There's a connection between question continuity and the issues of continuity through amelioration (which gave rise to Strawson's challenge): Q-continuity presupposes continuity of questions. The story about Q-continuity assumes that we can have the same question, for example, "Why do people get sick?" even as the answers vary. In particular, it assumes that the content of that question doesn't change as we change our answer from humor theory to answers given by contemporary medicine (nor will it change in the future, when our current terminology most likely will be as thoroughly rejected as humorism is now, but humans still try to answer the relevant question). That then raises issues about continuity of the content of "sick," because if its meaning changed too radically, then we would no longer be asking the same question. This connects us back to the topic-continuity through meaning evolution (which was one of the sources of Strawson's challenge). In sum: the two kinds of continuity are separate, but connected.

Abandonment: Implementation and Control

Insofar as amelioration involves changing the meaning of an expression, ameliorators need to figure out how to do that. There's disagreement about what that process involves, but agreement about the fact that it's really hard. According to some authors (e.g., Cappelen 2018), it's a process that's completely outside any individual's control. Others have argued that it is to some extent within our control (Jorem 2021, Pindar 2021). This cluster of issues goes under the label: the implementation problem for conceptual engineering.

One reason abandonment is an attractive option is that it's immediately implementable on an individual level. I can, right now, decide to never use the term "intuition" again. Suppose I think that it's a deeply flawed concept that philosophy would be better off without. I can act on that belief with immediate effect. I just need to make a commitment to not utter that expression ever again. The same goes for all the other examples of

abandonment that I have mentioned thus far. Abandonment at the individual level is easy, free, and very effective.

However, there is of course the issue of how to interact with preservationists. I've said a bit about that issue in Chapter 2, but I now want to address how to convert others to abandonment. Much of what there is to say here applies more generally to questions about how you get people to abandon entrenched social practices. If you want to discourage a certain pattern of behavior, you have some obvious options: A) you can try to convince people using arguments; B) you can make the behavior costly along some dimensions. Some examples of such dimensions:

- I. The cost could be implemented through social sanctions of various kinds—from disapproval to more severe forms of social sanction. Obvious examples are racist slurs.
- II. In some cases, the sanctions for using an expression can be legislated. Academics can be fired for using a racial slur. In France, the Toubon Law regulates the use of English expressions in public documents and schools.

What this should make clear is that the implementation of large-scale abandonment is neither more nor less difficult than familiar efforts to affect social change. What distinguishes abandonment from amelioration is this: an individual or a group of individuals can choose to implement it, and do so with immediate effect. That's not an option for those who aim to change the meaning of an expression.

A corollary of this distinguishing feature is that those who find an expression very objectionable, and who agree that changing the meaning of that expression will be very difficult and take some time, should be at least *temporary and strategic abolitionists*. While they work towards changing the meaning, they shouldn't be perpetuating the damage done by the expression, so they shouldn't use it.

Whataboutism as a Response to Arguments for Abandonment

I shall end this overview of abandonment theory with some remarks on an objection that often comes up when discussing particular instances of abandonment. It goes something like this:

The Whataboutism Reply: If you think that G should be abandoned, what about F? The arguments look like they might extend to F as well, but F is awesome and we cannot abandon F. So you shouldn't abandon G.

The more charitable description of this kind of objection is that it's an over-generation worry. The arguments in favor of particular instances of abandonment are too powerful. The worry, more specifically, is that if my arguments establish that "democracy" should be abandoned, then it looks like we should also abandon "justice," "freedom," "legitimacy," "autonomy," "equality," "good," "bad," and "Hello." It'll never end.³

I don't think that conceptual engineers in general, nor abolitionists in particular, should be moved by whataboutism. Here are four lines of response available to them:

1. **If you can do better, then why wouldn't you?** This is the most important reply to whataboutism. Suppose you have what I above called the perfect argument for the abandonment of T. If so, then you have evidence of T's defectiveness AND you have a way to do better. So someone who says, "There's this other concept, G, which is just like T" is in effect saying, "G is defective and we can do better than G." Well, if you think that G is defective and that you can do better than G, then why would you still think that G is awesome and irreplaceable? What this shows, I think, is that what my interlocutor really has in mind here is a challenge to the claim that we can do better. That, however, is not an overgeneration objection. It is, instead, an objection to one of the premises in the argument for abandonment (and so my interlocutor is in effect claiming that my argument is unsound). In other words, this hypothetical interlocutor is not objecting to the general idea that if we can do better than G, then, other things being equal, we should. They just don't think that we can do better.
2. **Don't ignore details of particular cases and contexts.** Overgeneration arguments tend to be abstract, and to overlook the significance of details of particular cases. In other words, the overgeneration objection tends to abstract from the details of a particular case, tries to find a

³ This line of reply can be found in Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken's (2022) response to Josh Habgood-Cooté's argument—discussed earlier—that we should abandon "fake news."

general pattern of argument, and then looks for instances of that pattern. This is the wrong way to go about abandonment, because the details of each case matter a lot.

3. **Some cases of abandonment are not controversial.** There are lots of cases of abandonment that it would be bizarre to deny based on overgeneration worries. There are many examples from the respective histories of science and philosophy of justified abandonment. These examples include “Vulcan,” “phlogiston,” “intuition,” “primitive,” “race,” “tribe,” “witch,” etc. Maybe you have doubts about some of these (I agree that including “intuition” is contentious), but if you agree that at least some of these abandonments are legitimate, then you also agree that there’s a research project here: explore other candidates for abandonment. The argument should not take the form: anything that satisfies conditions C should be abandoned. The core of an argument for abandonment should be based on careful case studies that are sensitive to details of particular historical and intellectual settings.
4. **Overgeneration arguments overgenerate.** Think of the use of a concept as a social practice. So understood, an abandonment proposal is the proposal to stop a certain social practice. There are many social practices that it would be good to change or abandon. In general, if we try to change or abandon one of them, we don’t want that effort to be blocked by abstract arguments of the form: if we fix practice P, then we must also fix many other practices of the same abstract kind as P, and that’s really hard, so we should preserve P. It’s fine to go case by case. We don’t need a complete revolution immediately: even if the long-term goal is universal improvement, that can happen gradually.
5. Finally, we should note that **conceptual engineering (construed as including the theory of abandonment) is a very ambitious and radical research project.** As a result, it’s a genuine possibility that future work will make a case for large-scale abandonment. The spirit of these arguments is radical, and potentially revolutionary. Conceptual engineering more generally is not a field that should be shy about its immense potential. If it all burns (or a lot of it burns), then so be it. Of course, with that metaphor in mind, there’s some caution required—we need to rely on something like the analogy we get from Neurath:

We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.

(Neurath 1921)

4

Abandonment and Communication

I have abandoned most religious terminology. I've also abandoned the term "intuition." However, I live in a world with many religious people, for whom the likes of "god," "devil," "blasphemy," etc., are important terms. I also have many colleagues who frequently use "intuition" and cognate terms. I need strategies for how to deal with these people when I meet them. More generally, abolitionists need to think about how to engage with preservationists.

Direct and Indirect Quotation

Let's start with the simplest point: even the most ardent abolitionists with respect to a term, T, should make exemptions for quotations. We quote the words that a particular person used, and in that way report on their use. Even the worst slur needs to be quoted from time to time—otherwise we have no way of saying that it's the worst of slurs. Past and present uses of the worst slur will still exist. There will not be a way to explain why that expression is so objectionable if we can't refer to it.

Indirect reports are more complicated. Many abolitionists about slurs are unwilling to use them even in indirect speech. Somehow, the objectionable features of slurs project out of even an indirect report, and reflect back on the reporter.¹ For almost all other cases of abandonment, the situation is more complicated. If someone has used a term that you have abandoned (because of emptiness, mismatch, verbal dispute potential, or negative consequences), it will often be appropriate to report the use of that abandoned term. I'm happy to say that Bob said that (or believes that) he was saved by god, or that he has an intuition, despite my abandonment of "god" and "intuition." Doing so does not violate my commitment to abandonment. It is not particularly puzzling why I do this, or how it's possible. I do it because I'm reporting on someone who used the defective term, and I can't give an

¹ Although maybe not in all cases, such as direct or pure quotation. See Hornsby (2001), Potts (2005), and Williamson (2009).

accurate report without using the term. Direct and indirect quotation are puzzling phenomena in general, but abolitionism doesn't add new puzzles.

How Can an Abolitionist Respect the Cooperative Principle?

Beyond direct and indirect quotation, linguistic interactions between abolitionists and preservationists can be awkward:

1. An abolitionist about "god" meets a preservationist and the latter asks, "Has god forgiven your sin yesterday?"
2. An "intuition" preservationist asks an abolitionist, like me, "What's your intuition about Gettier cases?"
3. A "race" preservationist meets an abolitionist and asks, "What race is your grandmother?"

There is no simple way for the abolitionist to respond. The questions, according to the abolitionists, are defective. At the same time, an abolitionist will, at least in some cases, find ways to cooperate with the interlocutor. At some higher level of abstraction, they will likely want to respect the cooperative principle. The initial challenge is figuring out how to cooperate when the question is asked using terminology they reject, so there cannot be a "straight" answer.

Here are three options for the abolitionist in these kinds of situations:

- *Negative existential reply combined with constructive diversion.* Here, the abolitionist will begin with a negative existential, and follow that with a constructive diversion, that is, a saying that is not directly an answer to the question, but that the abolitionist thinks her interlocutor might find interesting and relevant. To illustrate, consider the following exchange:
 - 1a. There is no god; however, I don't think I did anything wrong yesterday.
 - 2a. There are no intuitions, but pre-theoretically, I think a lot of people will go along with what Gettier says.
 - 3a. There are no races, but my grandmother is Norwegian and her skin color is pink.

- *A metalinguistic version of this reply.* There are metalinguistic versions of these replies that I prefer:
 - 1b. The expression “god” is empty and not one I use; however, I don’t think I did anything wrong yesterday.
 - 2b. The term “intuition” is defective and not one I use, but pre-theoretically, I think a lot of people will go along with what Gettier says.
 - 3b. The term “race” is defective and not one that I use, but my grandmother is Norwegian and her skin color is pink.
- *Stop cooperation—walk away.* Both of the above strategies assume that you can either quote or use the expression in a negative existential. That isn’t a good strategy for, for example, slurs. If someone asks: “Should we hire that N?” where “N” is a racial slur, the right response will often be to stop cooperating and just walk away. It’s not a conversation you want to improve on. While this is most obvious in the case of slurs, the point also applies more generally. Suppose you encounter someone using a defective term that is also deeply embedded in a theory or worldview that should be rejected (e.g., humorism, Christianity, Heideggerianism, Lacanianism, experimental philosophy, fascism). In many such cases, explaining why a term has been rejected is too much work, and the best strategy is to end the conversation. The efforts to coordinate terminology, that is, to get your interlocutor to speak using terminology you both accept, are not worth it, and unlikely to succeed. (Why? Well, we could just point to the fact that there’s work that suggests presenting someone with an ideology opposed to the one they espouse doesn’t seem to make them want to change their mind, but more directly: do you *really* think that you could talk a Lacanian around when they start telling you, “There’s no such thing as sexual intercourse, but merely attempts to attain the *jouissance* offered by the essentially absent *objet petit a*”?)

Understanding Preservationists

The problem with all three of these strategies is that they fail to engage with the cognitive states of the interlocutor—they are all forms of dismissal. That is not always good enough. Here is a passage from Appiah where he makes that point in connection with “race”:

Now, suppose there isn't one such thing in the world; then, on this view, there are no races. It will still be important to understand the vague criteria, because these will help us to understand what people who believe in races are thinking. That will be important, even if there are no races: first, because we often want to understand how other people are thinking, for its own sake; and, second, because people act on their beliefs, whether or not they are true. Even if there are no races, we could use a grasp of the vague criteria for the concept race in predicting what their thoughts and their talk about race will lead them to do; we could use it, too, to predict what thoughts about races various experiences would lead them to have. *Now, I have already declared myself very often on the question whether I think there are any races. I think there aren't.* So it is important that I am clear that I also believe that understanding how people think about race remains important for these reasons, even though there aren't any races. To use an analogy I have often used before, we may need to understand talk of "witchcraft" to understand how people respond cognitively and how they act in a culture that has a concept of witchcraft, whether or not we think there are, in fact, any witches. (Appiah 1996: 38)

Appiah, the "race" abolitionist, wants two things:

- A. To understand what preservationists about race think.
- B. To use that understanding of the preservationists to explain and predict their actions.

In order to do these things, Appiah suggests, we need to reconstruct some content—a belief—that we can express in our abolitionist language. The passage even suggests that this belief should be expressible without using the defective term, in this case "race." Think of this as a charitable strategy for understanding preservationists. It assumes that there is content in the preservationist's speech or thought that the abolitionist can uncover. That content helps the abolitionist to make sense of the preservationist, as well as to explain and predict the preservationist's actions.

However, when a lexical item is seriously defective, there might be no reconstructed content that makes sense of the preservationist's speech, and in particular no reconstructed, substitute content for the abandoned term. That said, Appiah's motivation is powerful, and in the next section I'll outline two ways to achieve both A and B when charitable interpretation isn't an option.

Diagnostic Explanation and Counterfactual Ameliorative Charity

We can broadly distinguish two ways of explaining what to do when someone performs a defective speech act and there's no charitable interpretation available: (1) diagnostic explanation and (2) counterfactual ameliorative charity.

Diagnostic Explanation

One alternative to Appiah-style charitable reconstruction is what I'll call a "diagnostic explanation." This is still an effort to understand preservationists, but it doesn't do so by trying to uncover some content that they are entertaining or acting on. Instead, it treats their speech and thought as it is: defective. The aim of a diagnostic explanation is to understand and explain the behavior of a broken and defective cognitive state. We do this not by finding a way to reconstruct a set of familiar contents (i.e., a set of propositions entertained), but rather by showing how the defective state has the result of making the person utter words, react, and act. We treat the agent as, at least in part, cognitively broken. This way of explaining agents is familiar from other settings. There are many kinds of intentional behavior that are best explained, at least in part, by various chemical imbalances in the agent's brain rather than by some rational principle. The claim is not that speakers who use a defective term are living with a mental illness. The claim is rather that there are similarities in how we should approach understanding and explaining such speakers' speech and thought. Defective terms generate defective cognitive states and processes, defective speech, and defective communicative interactions. At the most basic level, this all begins with an agent's illusion that they are able to say something using a term, *T*, and that the concept expressed by *T* can be the constituent of a thought. However, if *T* is sufficiently defective, their efforts to create contentful speech and genuine thoughts using *T* fail. What results is a kind of cognitive and linguistic fragment.² We understand such agents best by describing them as cognitively defective, not by charitably reconstructing them as having genuine thoughts (vague or otherwise). Of course, their minds will contain various disconnected fragments—some incomplete descriptive material,

² See, for example, Braun (1993) for some discussion on this phenomenon.

a lot of images and maybe emotions—but there’s no complete thought corresponding to the sentences containing T.

Recall Appiah’s advice that we should “. . . use a grasp of the vague criteria for the concept race in predicting what their thoughts and their talk about race will lead them to do; we could use it, too, to predict what thoughts about races’ various experiences would lead them to have.” In order to classify this as a proposal for charitable interpretation, I’m assuming that Appiah aims to assign a “vague content” to the users of “race,” and thus to argue that the fundamental defect is that their criteria are not sufficiently precise. However, vagueness is ubiquitous in language, so if that was the only defect, “race” wouldn’t really be defective at all. As a contrast, the diagnostic explanation highlights defects that are so fundamental that they deprive the agent of any ability to say something, and to think thoughts when they use certain expressions.

Counterfactual Ameliorative Charity

The strategy of charitable interpretation tells us that the proper way of treating preservationists is by charitably attributing complete (but vague) thoughts to them. The strategy of diagnostic explanation treats them as agents with defective cognitive states, and uses those defects to help us to understand and predict their behavior. I call the third strategy “counterfactual ameliorative charity.” This is closer to Appiah’s strategy, but it can be combined with the diagnostic explanation. It starts by recognizing that the actual interlocutor—the preservationist—is defective. In this way, it follows the diagnostic explanation. However, it doesn’t stop there. It continues by reconstructing ways in which the speaker could have improved on what she was attempting to do. This amounts to, for certain purposes, treating the agent as an improved version of themselves—one that, rather than performing a defective speech act, performed an act that has content. One that, rather than having a defective cognitive state, had a genuine thought.

This strategy might seem pointless: it is a bit like treating a sick person as if she were healthy. What would be the point of that? The point is that it might improve communicative interactions. In conversational contexts, people don’t like to be treated like broken objects, much in the same way as (some) people with illnesses don’t (in some contexts) like to be treated as sick people. They don’t like to be diagnosed and to have things explained. Communication tends to go more smoothly when there’s a sense of equality, where both parties are treated as having thought. When that’s the case,

it's helpful to *pretend* that the preservationist said something and had a thought (even though we know that she didn't do either of those things).

The Limits of Charity: When Preservationists and Abolitionists Are Too Far Apart

I'll end this overview of abolitionist–preservationist interaction on a more pessimistic note: counterfactual ameliorative charity doesn't always work. Often, a preservationist will simply *insist* on using the defective term and will also want to be taken at face value in doing so (i.e., not reinterpreted using a non-defective term). When this happens, and it happens all too often, it's exhausting for abolitionists to be around preservationists. Nor is it much fun for the preservationist to be around the abolitionist: their questions are never answered directly, and exhausting metalinguistic maneuvers need to be made on a regular basis. The results will often simply be conversational breakdowns.

The result is a situation in which the abolitionist and preservationist don't even disagree. For instance, people who disagree over what intuitions they have can have a discussion. They can give arguments for and against claims of the form “P is intuitive.” An abolitionist, like me, about “intuition” can't participate in this debate, and our presence will invariably shift the topic of conversation. This might not be a shift the original conversation partners are interested in making. Those who think about the world largely using religious terminology—“god,” “spirits,” “devil,” etc.—will have a very hard time engaging with those who reject that terminology. Note that this lack of engagement isn't to be explained by their belief systems being too far apart. That description would be biased in favor of the theist, because the abolitionist doesn't accept that religious terms can be used to express views or entertain thoughts at all. Rather, the parties are so far apart linguistically that often it just won't be worth the effort to have a conversation—they'll stay away from each other. This is one not infrequent result of abandonment: you get a deeply fragmented speech community. In the most extreme cases, one side can attempt to force the other to comply. This most easily happens when three conditions are in place:

- (i) the division between preservationists and abolitionists is unbridgeable;
- (ii) both sides think that a lot is at stake;
- (iii) there is a significant power asymmetry.

In some such cases, the abolitionist will enforce abandonment. The enforcement mechanisms will vary. Sometimes the sanctions are enforced by social norms, and sometimes even by laws. Racial and ethnic slurs provide the best examples here. There are strong social sanctions imposed on those who use them,³ and sometimes those are enforced by law.

³ An extreme case: *The New York Times* fired one of their best journalists for just mentioning (in quotation marks) a racial slur. For more on this bizarre case, see: <https://donalngmcneiljr1954.medium.com/nytimes-peru-n-word-part-four-what-happened-in-peru-2a641a9b5e83>. For the legal issues, see, for example, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-asked-decide-if-use-racial-slur-amounts-illegal-n1258355>.

PART II
SOME DATA ABOUT
“DEMOCRACY”

5

The Ordinary Notion of “Democracy”

Methodological Preamble

Introduction and Overview

In the previous chapter, I sketched a view about the nature of abandonment, the conditions under which it’s justified, and its implications. However, as with any complex and entrenched human practice, the details matter. There’s no one-size-fits-all framework for thinking about these issues, and the most interesting and important considerations will often originate from the details of a particular case. These details will feed back into the general theory. The particular case I shall focus on is “democracy” and “democratic”—what I’ll call the “D-words.” This chapter starts building a case for their abandonment. The case is by no means conclusive, and part of what makes this case study so interesting is that it illustrates the extraordinary complexity that surrounds any judgment about abandonment (and whether it’s preferable to amelioration).

In my previous book *Fixing Language*, I discussed conceptual engineering without any detailed investigation of particular cases. The goal was to highlight issues that would be relevant to *any* conceptual engineering project, independently of the details of particular cases. “Woman,” “infinity,” “torture,” and “belief” are expressions with very different histories and social roles, but, as I argued in *Fixing Language*, those engaged in engineering these concepts face closely related challenges. If that’s right, it’s the beginning of a case for the general field of “conceptual engineering.” There are many case-independent issues that can be discussed in the abstract. Examples of these general issues include:

- Questions about topic continuity: how much revision is too much?
- What exactly is supposed to be ameliorated: what are concepts or meanings or something else?
- Implementation problem: to what extent can we control the meaning of an expression?

There is, however, a worry that discussion of these high-level concepts in isolation from particular cases will be sterile and methodologically flawed: maybe the central way to make progress on the high-level questions is to work through particular cases.

This book is different. Its focus is on a particular case study—“democracy” and “democratic.” These expressions are not just at the center of contemporary discourse; they also play an important role in structuring political decisions and actions. It’s hard to think of concepts that have an equally central role in the contemporary world. While the D-words have been central to political thinking for the last 2,000 years, abandonment has never been explicitly defended before. For about 2,000 years, the debate has been between the pro- and anti-democracy camps:

The historically dominant view: Pro-‘democracy’ and anti-democracy: The term ‘democracy’ is sound and useful. What ‘democracy’ picks out is bad and undesirable.

The contemporary Western consensus: Pro-‘democracy’ and pro-democracy: The term ‘democracy’ is sound and useful. What ‘democracy’ picks out is wonderful and desirable.

This absurdly oversimplified history of political philosophy is meant to make salient the *conceptual conservativeness* of the traditional debate. The historically opposing sides agree that the D-words are worth preserving. To be maximally explicit, this book is not on the anti-democracy side. It’s an anti-“democracy” book. It’s opposed to both camps insofar as they agree on the fact that the D-words are theoretically useful.

For those already immersed in the literature on conceptual engineering, it should come as no surprise that the domain of politics might have rotten concepts at its core. If “truth,” “freedom,” and “knowledge” are suspect, why wouldn’t “democracy” be? Even if you’re not as predisposed towards general conceptual skepticism as I am, the specific case of politics should raise plenty of red flags. It’s a domain in which important concepts

are shaped by their use in a practice that is fundamentally anti-intellectual and driven in large part by ignorance, prejudice, obfuscation, propaganda, and other forms of manipulation.¹ The aim of that practice is not intellectual progress, nor conceptual clarity. The aim is primarily to obtain and keep power. This should motivate those who theorize about politics to lift the quality of their theoretical concepts to a higher, more sophisticated level. To some extent, that has happened, and I'll return to that below. However, in the discussions of political governance, the D-words still play an enormous role. Compare these discussions with those occurring in physics, where the theoretical domain has introduced completely new concepts and rejected folk concepts in order to make progress. This has, for the most part, not happened in the normative debates over political governance.

In order to assess the value of a particular lexical item, you need to know something about it. My arguments against “democracy” and “democratic” will rely in part on details about what I'll broadly call their “lexical semantics.” I'm fairly confident that most practitioners of political philosophy, political theory, political science, politics, and political activism will actively resist (and even ridicule) this procedure. So I'll start by giving a brief justification, and also introduce some philosophical background for that approach.

When Does the Ordinary Notion Matter?

The topic of this book involves the concepts of *democracy* and *democratic*. One way in which I'll approach that topic is through an understanding of how the terms “democracy” and “democratic” are used in English. Many theorists will reject that approach and argue that they can stipulate a meaning for those terms and thus don't need to be concerned with a detailed understanding of ordinary notions. A model here might be the sciences, such as physics and biology. The goal of this brief chapter is to convince you that political theory should not be like the hard sciences: there's an imperative to understand the ordinary notions that shape the political thinking and motivations of regular citizens.

¹ Brennan (2016: ch. 2) provides a good overview of some of the data here—see also Caplan (2008), Somin (2013), and Stanley (2015).

First Reason for Interest in the Ordinary Notion: What Ordinary Speakers Are Talking About

I'll start with the two most obvious reasons for taking interest in the ordinary notion. First, if your interest is in the phenomenon that the non-theorists are thinking and talking about, then you obviously have to study the actual phenomenon they are thinking and talking about (using their ordinary, non-technical notion). This is close to a truism: if your goal is to theorize about the phenomenon that citizens, politicians, and others are thinking and talking about when they use the ordinary notion of “democracy,” then you cannot ignore what the ordinary notion of democracy is about (or what the English expression “democracy” picks out). This contrasts with a concept such as “mass”: physicists are not interested in capturing what non-theorists are talking about when they use “mass.” It's hard to say exactly what the goals of physics are, but whatever they are, they don't include capturing what various people think “mass” is. That's not to say that wouldn't be a sensible field of study, rather that it's just not a topic physicists are interested in. Compare this with the role of “knowledge” in epistemology: epistemologists want to understand the phenomenon that we talk about when we make knowledge attributions using that expression. They don't proceed by constructing a theoretically useful notion that diverges significantly from the ordinary notion.

Second Reason for Interest in the Ordinary Notion: What Ordinary Speakers Say and Think

A second—closely related—reason for interest in the ordinary notion is this: if you are also interested in what non-theorists think, and what they say to each other using the ordinary notion of “democracy,” then you need to understand the notion they use for thinking and talking.² Democracy (what is expressed by the ordinary notion) seems to have been a topic of discussion, a source of fundamental disagreement, and a central motivator of social change, wars, and revolutions for the past 2,000 years. Here are some moderate but representative examples of the kind of talk I have in

² To be maximally clear: the first reason is world-directed: the focus is on the phenomenon in the world. The second reason has to do with an interest in interpreting what individual speakers say and think. The issues are closely connected, but distinct.

mind, taken from some debates that are somewhat salient at the moment this book is being written:

- More than 100 scholars have issued a dire warning that Republicans are putting the democracy of the United States in danger by restricting access to voting, and by perpetuating the fiction that the 2020 presidential election was not secure. The statement was signed by more than 100 academics with expertise in politics, government, international affairs, public policy, and other areas.³
- The US faces an uphill task presenting itself as the chief guardian of global democracy, according to a 2021 poll that shows that **the United States is seen around the world as more of a threat to democracy than even Russia and China**. In perhaps the most startling finding, nearly half (44 percent) of respondents in the fifty-three countries surveyed are concerned that the United States threatens democracy in their country; by contrast, fear of Chinese influence is 38 percent, and fear of Russian influence is lowest, at 28 percent. The findings may in part reflect views on the comparative power of the United States, but they show that neither the United States, nor the G7, can simply assume the mantle of defenders of democracy.⁴
- When President Joe Biden, in remarks made at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Memorial Day, said that “democracy itself is in peril, here at home and around the world,” the natural reaction among many people was an eye-roll. Democracy in peril? In the United States? Really? Americans tend to believe that democracy is too powerful an idea to fall into disrepair. The past four years, however, have proven how tenuous a hold democracy has on the public.⁵
- “I’m not the one trying to undermine American democracy,” Mr. Trump told a cheering crowd after falsely accusing Democrats of stealing the 2020 election and railing against mail-in and absentee voting. “I’m the one who’s trying to save it. Please remember that.”⁶

³ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/experts-democracy-under-threat-republicans_n_60b6d914e4b04b216be09383?ncid=NEWSSTAND0001.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/05/us-threat-democracy-russia-china-global-poll>.

⁵ https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/31/politics/democracy-danger-memorial-day/index.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+rss%2F cnn_topstories+%28RSS%3A+CNN+-+Top+Stories%29.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/05/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-convention-speech.html>.

Here are some salient facts about these kinds of passages:

- They are representative of the kind of speech that dominates public discourse. The agreement and disagreement over these claims have massive practical implications.
- They assume that there’s a concept, *democracy*, that is shared broadly: between 100 experts, between people across the globe, and even between President Biden and former President Trump.
- If you’re interested in those debates, you cannot ignore what (if anything) participants are thinking and talking about when using “democracy” and “democratic.”

In particular, if you want to understand what is going on here, you need to understand what role the word “democracy” is performing, as it’s at the core of these debates.⁷

It is not only at the core of these (and other) debates, but also at the core of what motivates political action, and so to understand and predict that action, you need to understand the ordinary notion of democracy. The fact that some people value the thing they call “democracy” can help to explain and predict their actions, and the fact that others don’t value it can also help to explain and predict the actions of those in this group. What explains their actions is not an esoteric theoretical definition constructed by a theorist, but rather the content that they themselves have in mind (whatever that may be).

Third Reason for an Interest in the Ordinary Notion: The Ontology of Social Objects

One standard view of social ontology is that social objects—such as dollar bills, parliaments, and democracies—exist in part because of the mental states of the members of the relevant social groups. There are myriad views about how such objects come into being, and how their existence is preserved over time. One fairly standard view is that the beliefs and attitudes of the group members are constitutive of their existence. This point is particularly

⁷ If after reading this book, you become convinced that “democracy” is empty or nonsensical, then you’ll end up having a dim view of these debates. I’m not assuming that conclusion in this initial characterization.

clear in John Searle. According to Searle (1995),⁸ constitutive rules of the form “X (a physical object) counts as Y (a social status) in a context, C” are at the core of social ontology. “Y” denotes what Searle calls a status function—it assigns a status to things that satisfy the X-conditions (this is a new status that the objects don’t have simply in virtue of satisfying the X-conditions). Here’s an illustration:

Certain sorts of bits of paper are widely circulated in the United States. These pieces of paper satisfy certain conditions that constitute satisfying the X term. The pieces must have particular material ingredients, and they must match a certain set of patterns (five dollar bill, ten dollar bill, etc.). They must also be issued by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing under the authority of the U.S. Treasury. Anything that satisfies these conditions (X term) counts as money, i.e., U.S. paper currency (Y term). But to describe these bits of paper with the Y term “money” does more than provide a shorthand label for the features of the X term; it describes a new status, and that status, viz. money, has a set of functions attached to it, e.g., medium of exchange, store of value, etc. In virtue of the constitutive rule, the paper counts as “legal tender for all debts public and private.” And the imposition of this status function by the Y term has to be collectively recognized and accepted or the function will not be performed.

(Searle 1995: 45–6)

Two points are important:

1. First, Searle thinks that there has to be collective agreement or acceptance over these constitutive rules, “...because the physical features specified by the X term are insufficient to guarantee success in fulfilling the assigned function, there must be continued collective acceptance or recognition of the validity of the assigned function; otherwise the function cannot be successfully performed. It is not enough, for example, that we agree with the original assignment, ‘This stuff is money’; we must continue to accept it as money or it will become worthless.” (Searle 1995: 45)
2. Second, and here we finally come to the point that’s crucial in the current context, language is essential for the imposition of status

⁸ For a discussion of this in connection with conceptual engineering, see Cappelen (2018: 44).

functions. According to Searle, “language is essentially constitutive of institutional reality.” This, according to Searle, is because it is “impossible to have institutional structures such as money, marriage, governments, and property without some form of language because...the words or other symbols are partly constitutive of the facts.” (Searle 1995: 59)

The view that language is constitutive of social reality is not entirely implausible, and its plausibility doesn’t depend on the details of Searle’s argument here: other views might somewhat reduce the role of language in social ontology, but still assign it a central role (for a good overview of options, see Epstein 2015).⁹ In short, the following is a reasonable working hypothesis: a social object like a political system is in part constituted by the mental states of its participants. The meaning of the term “democracy” plays a central explanatory role in the relevant mental states. So to understand our political system, we would need to understand the meaning of this term.

Lessons from Epistemology and Moral Philosophy: The Importance of Language

Political philosophers have shown little interest in the ordinary notions of “democracy” and “democratic.”¹⁰ For the most part, they are happy to introduce stipulative definitions. I shall discuss those in more detail in Chapters 10 and 11. I’ll end this chapter by some additional brief remarks about the underlying methodology. I’m imagining the typical theorist of democracy to say:

The ordinary notion is a mess, but who cares? What matters are the technical notions that we theorists develop. It’s just like other disciplines, for example, economics: economists don’t care about the ordinary notion of ‘inflation.’ They care about the technical notion and what it picks out.

⁹ For example, Mikkola, while disagreeing with many parts of Searle’s view, says: “Many paradigm objects that social ontology studies are said to be socially constructed in some sense. Bluntly put: they are said to exist and have the natures that they do by virtue of what we—social agents—ascibe and attribute to those objects” (Mikkola 2021: 31).

¹⁰ This section draws heavily on Cappelen and McKeever (2022, which again was drawn from this book manuscript).

Above, I outlined three reasons for not proceeding in this way: (i) you miss out on what ordinary speakers talk about; (ii) you miss out on what ordinary speakers think and say; (iii) you miss out on a constitutive feature of social ontology. If this is all unconvincing to you and you care only about definitions introduced by stipulations, then I suggest moving directly to the discussion in Part IV of this book.

Before moving on, I want to pursue this discussion a bit further, and point out how unusual democratic theory is in that it has not taken an interest in the ordinary notions of “democracy” and “democratic.” Here are some examples from other parts of philosophy where such data has played important and constructive roles over the past fifty to sixty years:

- **Epistemology:** Epistemologists are interested in knowledge and the conditions under which people can obtain knowledge. Epistemologists don’t typically start their papers with a technical definition of “knows” and then use that in their theorizing. They are often concerned with what ordinary speakers talk about when they use “knows,” and they are interested in what ordinary speakers think and say when they use this term. This is why, over the past thirty years, many of the most central debates and theories in epistemology have, in large part, been inextricably intertwined with data about the lexical semantics of “knows.” This is most obviously the case for discussions between contextualists, invariantists, and relativists about knowledge (respectively discussed in Lewis 1996, Hawthorne 2003, and MacFarlane 2014: ch. 8, but also many others). These debates are also the background for the most important contemporary discussions of skepticism (e.g. Derose (1996), Cohen (1988)). We see the same in other domains of epistemology. Stanley and Williamson (2001) argue that *knowing-how* is a species of *knowing-that*, explicitly basing their view on the semantics of knowledge-how attributions. Ian Rumfitt (2003) demurs, and uses as evidence the fact that languages such as French, ancient Greek, Latin, and Russian lexicalize “knowledge how” and “knowledge that” differently.
- **Moral philosophy:** Moral philosophers don’t typically start their papers and books with stipulative definitions of “good,” “bad,” “ought,” etc., and then go on to theorize about those concepts. Instead, they often pay careful attention to what ordinary speakers think and say when they use those terms. A snapshot of some of that work: logical positivists and others reacted to Moore’s intuitionism and proposed

non-cognitivist theories of value (for example, notably Ayer 1936, Stevenson 1944), according to which there was no non-natural reality out there for us to intuit. In cutting out the world from our theory of value, they were left with the explanatory burden of explaining our value-laden thought and talk, and emotivism, as its name suggested, proposed that such thought and talk expressed our feelings about parts of the natural world, as opposed to our feelings about non-natural properties or states of affairs. That in turn inaugurated a research program, which thrives to this day, of making sense of how moral talk can interact with fact-stating talk while having such a foreign purpose. Geach (1965) presents the issue acutely. If “eating meat is wrong” expresses disapproval—a non-cognitive attitude (stylized in the literature as “Boo eating meat!”)—then how do we explain the acceptability of “if eating meat is wrong, then we should subsidise R&D for lab-grown meat,” in light of the fact that “if ‘boo eating meat!’ then we should subsidize R&D for lab-grown meat” is nonsense. People have taken up the challenge to give a semantic theory that can make sense of this, resulting in many sophisticated theories.¹¹ What does matter is that this literature is deeply immersed in the careful analysis of ordinary thought and talk.

These are just two examples from a very long list of similar illustrations of how attention to the ordinary notion has been very, very useful (for many more illustrations and some added theoretical background, see Cappelen and McKeever 2022). The proposal in this book is that, for “democracy” and “democratic,” paying attention in this way will reveal conceptual defects, which will motivate both abandonment and better ways to talk and think.

¹¹ Recent work includes Schroeder (2008), Charlow (2014), Silk (2015), and references therein.

6

Some Data about “Democracy” and “Democratic”

I'll start by outlining seven features of “democracy” and “democratic” that I shall refer back to when presenting the arguments in favor of abandonment, and when assessing other theories:

1. “Democracy” as a count noun and an adjective.
2. Paradigmatic applications of “democracy.”
3. Some salient features of paradigms.
4. Expressive and normative dimensions.
5. Lexical effects and the Shibboleth Effect.
6. Genealogy and Athens as an anchoring point.
7. Lack of experts and lack of convergence among candidate experts.

A note about how to read this chapter: It contains more material than is strictly speaking needed for the arguments in the rest of the book. A lot of this might seem like insignificant minutia about some English words (‘democracy’ and ‘democratic’). If you come to this book with a primary interest in political decision-making, your patience will be tested. For those readers (and maybe also others), I recommend going straight to Part III, and then returning to this chapter if you feel the need for it. The points from this chapter will be repeated when relied on in later chapters.

Basics: A Count Noun and an Adjective

The usages that most immediately come to mind for many are those that occur when “democracy” is used as a count noun:

- *The New York Times* is not a democracy.
- Norway is a democracy.
- Should corporations be democracies?

So used, “democracy” is typically used to classify various groups, institutions, and structures. When “democracy” is used as a noun, it is often modified in various ways, as in:

- liberal democracy;
- representative democracy;
- direct democracy;
- constitutional democracy;
- American/Russian/Athenian democracy.

These are often described as “different forms of democracy.” So, the tacit assumption is that democracy is something that comes in different forms. There’s a core phenomenon—what “democracy” picks out—which can be modified in various ways. In that respect it’s like “cake”: there are, for example, chocolate cakes, sponge cakes, and pound cakes. *Prima facie*, there’s a sense in which these all share the property of being a cake. The property of being a cake can be manifested in very diverse forms. A cluster of issues I’ll repeatedly return to is whether we can find such a common core for “democracy,” and, if we can’t, does that matter?¹

Another point I’ll return to at almost every crucial turn in this book is that a theory of *democracy* is incomplete unless it is accompanied by an account of what it is to be *democratic*. Any view that ignores the adjective is doomed. I’ll argue below that the adjective is more important than the noun—that is, that *being democratic* is more fundamental than *being a democracy*. I should note that when I’ve presented the ideas in this book over the past few years, I’ve found it extraordinarily hard to get people to take this idea seriously. It’s a point that’s been largely overlooked in earlier work on democracy. It’s been a blind spot, and whenever you find a blind spot, it’s always worth it to dig deep and linger. In short, I hope that readers will be willing to at least consider the possibility that understanding the adjective is a fundamental issue in democratic theory (even though “understanding the adjective” sounds pedestrian compared to the typically lofty

¹ This kind of issue comes up in many domains. The concept of truth is a paradigm: do all truths have something in common? Those who say “yes” have various proposals for what the common element is: correspondence, coherence, or picturing. Those who say there’s no commonality sometimes hold the view that the best we can come up with is a list of all truths.

goals of democratic theory.) The adjective “democratic” can apply to many different kinds of objects and phenomena:

- democratic decision-making;
- democratic law;
- democratic institutions;
- democratic corporations;
- democratic cultures;
- democratic countries, cities, organizations, clubs, families.

Most of the things that are democratic are not democracies. Democratic laws and institutions are not democracies—only various kinds of groups can be democracies. However, a group can be *democratic* even if it isn’t a *democracy*, so long as people are contributing to the overall democratic structure of the group, in the way that a democratic law or democratic institution can contribute to a democracy. For example, if a small group of politicians in parliament makes decisions about committee roles, that can be democratic, even if the group itself isn’t a democracy. Groups, so understood, can contribute to an overall democratic structure without themselves being democracies.

Here’s a natural hypothesis: *if something that’s not a democracy (e.g., a law or a group) is correctly described as “democratic,” then it must in some way (potentially) contribute to something else being a democracy.* This lends initial support to the idea that there’s a bunch of features (the democratic-features) that somehow add together and make it the case that something is a democracy. It can’t be the case that *X is a democracy*, unless X contains a sufficient number of democratic-features. A strong version of this view holds that our use of “democracy” presupposes that there’s a set of democratic features, such that when they are added together in the right way, the result is a democracy. Weaker versions of the view will simply say that, without democratic features, there can be no democracy. Then there’s a large number of intermediate positions.

Gradability

“Democratic” is a gradable adjective. It is treated as something that we can have more or less of. In that respect it is similar to “warm” (it’s very warm in

Hong Kong—warmer than in Norway), and it is different from “boiling” (a liquid is either boiling or not).

- Switzerland is more democratic than Norway.
- Harvard is less democratic than the University of Hong Kong, but more democratic than North Korea.

The English word “democratic,” therefore, denotes a property that comes in degrees. How democratic something is will depend on a comparison class, and a cutoff on a scale.² The comparison class and the cutoff will vary between contexts. In other words, what it takes to be democratic will vary between contexts: there will be a scale with democracy-degrees, and something needs to be at a certain threshold on that scale in order to be a democracy at all. What that threshold is will be context-dependent (just as something needs to be above a certain threshold in order to be expensive, but that threshold varies depending on the comparison class: cars, skyscrapers, and carrots have different comparison classes).

As a corollary, the interpretations of sentences containing “democratic” will vary depending on the contexts in which those sentences are uttered.³ Moreover, and this is important: the elements that go into the scale will also differ between contexts. One way to see that is to think about the difference between what would be needed to describe a small group of people as democratic versus what would be needed to describe a large social structure, such as a country, as democratic.

An adjective can be gradable even if the corresponding noun doesn’t come in degrees: the gradability of ‘democratic’ doesn’t imply that democracies come in degrees.⁴ Similarly, even though there’s a mass-noun use of ‘democracy’ (“There’s more democracy in Sweden than in the UK”), That doesn’t mean that the count noun use is gradable. When we talk about there

² A recent work that covers both the semantic details and some of the philosophical consequences of degree-theoretic approaches to lexical semantics is Kennedy (2007); the references there are also helpful.

³ I here follow without argument standard work in the semantics of gradable adjectives, as in, e.g., Kennedy (2007) and Kennedy and McNally (2005), according to which gradable adjectives encode a scale derived from a comparison class. Their use in a context picks out a point on that scale, and felicitous utterances may depend on the point on the scale taking, at least or at most, a certain value. Something, e.g., a person, is tall only in the context of a basketball game provided it is at least as tall as a threshold value on the scale, which might be something like six feet six inches.

⁴ Influential work in this vein is that of Sartori (e.g. 1970). It will become clear how my perspective differs from his, and the work it spawned.

being more milk in Bottle A than in Bottle B, it doesn't mean that the milk in Bottle B is less milk than the milk in Bottle A (all the milk is 100 percent milk). It just means there's less of a thing (which is milk to the same degree) in Bottle B.

Some Paradigmatic Applications of “Democracy”

If you want to investigate inflation, or non-violent transitions of power, or education systems, you need to start with a handful (or more) of instances of those phenomena. Then you investigate the properties of those instances, and those properties, combined with other data, will help you construct an explanatory theory. The same goes for efforts to understand democracy. A theory of democracy will start with at least some paradigms of what's in the extensions of “democracy” and “democratic.” If there's broad consensus among competent speakers that some particular cases are correctly described as “democracy” or “democratic,” those cases make for good starting points. Similarly, if we have cases that are clearly not correctly described as “democratic,” those are also useful. We can then start our theorizing by comparing the features of the democracies and contrasting them with the features of the non-democracies. Further theorizing could revise the original classifications, but this approach will nonetheless be a good starting point.

- **Some paradigms of “democracy” and “democratic”:** I'll take it as a given that many kinds of groups and organizations can be democratic. If we start with countries, there's broad consensus that, among contemporary countries, Norway and Canada are democracies. Historically, things get more controversial quickly, but there seems to be broad consensus that at least some aspects of the political structure in Athens around the sixth century BC were democratic. Smaller democratic units include the cooperative in Kirkeveien 65A, the town of St Andrews in Scotland, and the philosophy department at Hong Kong University.⁵ For now, I'll put aside the question of what it is about these examples that makes them democracies, and simply note that if there are any democracies, these are *prima facie* paradigmatic candidates. Of course,

⁵ For example, in the Hong Kong philosophy department we don't have votes or elected officers, although we do have an appointed head of department. Most decisions are taken by the department via conversation that attempts to reach consensus.

being “*prima facie* candidates” doesn’t mean that it’s a necessary condition of a theory that it classifies any of these as democracies. It probably does mean, though, that to *fail* to classify them as such will require explanation. Insofar as theorizing starts with paradigms, these (and similar cases) seem like good ones to use.

- **Paradigms of groups not classified as “democracy”:** Paradigms of groups that, by broad consensus, are not classified as “democratic” include, at the country level, North Korea. Smaller units that are indisputably not democracies include Harvard University, Tesla, and *The New York Times*. Many important decisions that Harvard makes are made by a small group of unelected people.⁶ Similar things can be said about the *New York Times* (for over a century it has been under the control of one, extended family), and Tesla.⁷
- **Paradigms of “democratic decision”:** Membership in the Norwegian parliament is decided on in a paradigmatically democratic way. So is who should be director of graduate studies at HKU’s philosophy department. Therefore, these are paradigmatically “democratic” decisions. Of course, maybe that initial impression is wrong, but then some explanation is needed.
- **Paradigms of “non-democratic decision”:** The syllabus for *Phil2225 The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence* at HKU is decided by me. That’s a paradigmatic non-democratic decision. How a particular brain surgery should be performed at Mount Sinai Hospital is decided by the lead surgeon, not democratically. Tenure decisions at Harvard are made in a non-democratic way. Again, this isn’t to say that a theory couldn’t overturn these pre-theoretic judgments about what’s in the extension of “democratic,” but some explanation would be required.

It should also be fairly non-controversial that, at the most basic and abstract level, what these examples instantiate is some kind of pattern in

⁶ If you care for the details: Harvard is governed by two boards, the Board of Overseers and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, which in turn appoint the president of the university. Per Harvard’s website, the Board of Overseers “exerts broad influence over the University’s strategic directions, provides counsel to the University leadership on priorities and plans, and has the power of consent to certain actions of the Corporation. The Board’s chief functions include superintendence of the visitation process, the principal mechanism for periodic external review of the quality and direction of the University’s schools, departments, and selected other programs and activities.”

⁷ Elon Musk and his brother Kimbal Musk are, by some distance, the largest shareholders on the board of directors relative to their legal status. Elon counts as an “institutional” investor and Kimbal an “individual” one, but we needn’t get into that.

how collective decisions are made. These cases all involve groups of people who need to make collective decisions (about what to do in particular cases, and about rules and regulations). The terms “democracy” and “democratic” are introduced as ways to describe how those collective decisions can be made. The paradigms of “democratic” groups will share characteristic decision-making features, which are not shared by the non-paradigms. One of the goals in what follows will be to find out if there’s some coherent way to describe that commonality (and if there isn’t, whether that matters).

So far I’ve been talking as if a group is either in the extension of “democracy” or not, and as if a decision is either classified as “democratic” or not. That’s not meant to rule out that these features come in degrees. If democracies come in degrees, then it’s not a matter of either being or not being a democracy, but rather the degree to which something is democratic (see Chapter 10 for more discussion of the degree notion of democracy and democratic in connection with democracy indices).

There might be theorists who would resist starting with paradigmatic cases. I can imagine someone saying that their interest in democracy doesn’t stem from a desire to classify particular existing cases. Instead, these theorists think of their aim as that of exploring or developing the idea of democracy. A theory of democracy, on this view, is a theory of an idea, and it doesn’t need to start by exploring particular cases that instantiate that idea. However, even such a theorist will presumably be moved to revise their theory if it ended up classifying North Korea and *The New York Times* as democracies, and excluding Norway and Hong Kong University philosophy department. If they just accept that consequence, then we could reasonably conclude that their theory isn’t about democracy, but about something else. Or, it is at least not about what ordinary speakers want to talk about when they use “democracy.” In short, it’s hard to see how any theorizing can get off the ground without doing some testing, at some point, against presumed paradigms.

Some Features of the Paradigmatic Instances of “Democracy”

Just as there is broad agreement about some of the paradigms of “democracy” and “democratic,” there is also broad agreement about some salient facts of those paradigms (and anti-paradigms) that, at least *prima facie*, a theory of democracy should capture. Here are such salient facts (though I’ll talk about how to deny these facts below):

- a. **Input-mechanism:** Democracies can be direct or representative, and each of these options can involve widely different mechanisms. Direct democracy can be, and has been, implemented in many different ways, and representative democracy also has endless variations in how votes are cast, how they are combined to pick a winner, etc. Moreover, it’s worth noting that democracies need not have elections: they can have lotteries (as in Athens and some places today). This was, for a long period, considered the paradigm of democratic decision-making (see, e.g., Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1294be). The HKU philosophy department is democratic, but we hardly ever have votes. Instead, we discuss and end up with an agreement. That’s also democratic. We cannot rule out that new technology will provide new mechanisms for tracking citizens’ preferences in ways that are better than asking them to go out and punch a piece of paper (often in the rain, often when they are busy, often after they have had to stand in long lines, etc.). What’s important here is that no one of these particular decision-making procedures is required for the decision to be democratic. If there’s an “essence” to democratic decision-making, it has to be something that these various procedures have in common.
- b. **Kinds of decisions:** Assume we have an account of what it is to be a democratic decision. Now we’re interested in whether Group G is a democracy. Group G is a large group, and there are many decisions made in that group. Even in a small country like Norway, billions of decisions are made (by individual people, groups of people, corporations, organizations, etc.) every day. We want to know what *kinds* of decisions among G’s members need to be made in a democratic way in order for G to be a democracy.

Suppose millions of decisions are made democratically in Group G, but all those decisions are about silly issues, while all the *important* decisions are made by Bob, on his own in a non-democratic way. Then G would not be a democracy. Bob is a dictator who just sprinkles millions of democratic decisions all around in order to give G the appearance of being a democracy.

All this is just to say that those interested in what makes a group a democracy need an account of the kinds of decisions that must be made in a democratic way for a group to be a democracy. It’s also possible that this account will differ depending on context: maybe in a

family, those very same decisions that Bob allows democratic decision-making about would suffice to make the family a democracy.⁸

There’s an analogous point to be made about “democratic” decisions: decisions are complex events with many stages, participants, and processes. They are not simple, instantaneous happenings. Think of a complex decision about whether to build a bridge, or whether to give someone tenure at a university. These decisions will have many stages. Suppose the decision has ten stages, but the really important stages are the ninth and tenth. Then Bob, our dictator, could make sure that stages one to eight are democratic, but then he jumps in and makes all the important decisions, that is, the ninth and tenth. Even though there are a lot of democratic stages in this decision, it’s not democratic. Hence, we need an account of the kind of stage at which the democratic process (whatever that is) needs to occur.

- c. **Quantity:** Suppose we have an account of the kind of decision-making that’s democratic: democratic decisions are those with the set of characteristics C. Having clarified that, we need a second part of the theory that tells us how many of the C-type decisions need to be made democratically for the group to count as a democracy. Note the following undisputed facts:
- i. In the paradigmatically democratic countries, a massive amount of decisions of enormous importance for citizens are *not* made in a way anyone would count as “democratic.” Legal decisions are made by judges, interest rates are set by central banks, privately owned corporations exercise enormous control over citizens’ day-to-day lives, newspapers and other sources of information are owned, run, and controlled by small groups of people, etc. In my native country, Norway, many of the most important decisions for the collective are made by those running the Government Pension Fund (aka the Oil Fund)—essentially a few bankers. These people regularly make decisions with much more impact on Norwegians’ lives than those made by a member of the Norwegian parliament. In sum: the paradigmatic democracies are not groups where most

⁸ In the political case, there’s a temptation to move right into a vicious circle: the relevant decisions are those that are political, and the political decisions are those made in a democratic way. That’s bad, not just because it is circular, but also because it fails to generalize to a notion of democracy that applies to collective decision-making overall.

important decisions are made in a “democratic” way. The quantity of democratic decisions varies between democracies, and the kinds of decisions made in a democratic way also vary. An account of what makes a group (e.g., a country) a democracy will need to settle on a threshold: the amount and kind of democratic decision-making that makes a democracy.

The flip side of this discussion is that even in groups that are non-democratic—e.g., North Korea, Harvard, *The New York Times*, and Tesla—many decisions are made in democratic ways. In sum: the presence of *some* democratic decisions doesn’t suffice for a group or institution to be democratic. Whether or not a group is a democracy is not determined by just the number of decisions within that group. That would make it really easy to transform a non-democracy into a democracy, by just instituting an enormous amount of democratic elections about silly and slightly less silly issues, like when to have a coffee break, where to put a speed bump, what kinds of flowers to plant in a park, etc.⁹

- d. **Embedding:** Kind, Quantity, and Input mechanisms alone are not sufficient to determine whether a group is a democracy (or a decision is democratic). Those elements alone leave totally open the possibility that agents can be forced, bribed, manipulated, or deprived of an opportunity to give input and participate in the right way. In other words, it matters how kind, quantity, and input are embedded in a larger cultural, historical, and social setting. What exactly is required from this embedding is a crucial question that I shall return to repeatedly in what follows.

The Cost of Ignoring Paradigms, Commonality, and KQIE Structure

If a theorist aims to provide a descriptively adequate account of the meaning of “democracy” and “democratic” in English, it would be strange to not

⁹ Tristram McPherson commented on the above material, saying: “I found the discussion of quantity to undermine the thesis that quantity of democratic decision-making is relevant for qualifying as a paradigm democracy. It seems to me that this discussion strongly suggests that if we had a good theory of the kinds of decisions whose democraticness makes an institution democratic, then probably the mere quantity of democratic decisions is irrelevant: ever so many democratic decisions of the wrong kind are not going to cut it.” Point of disagreement: I leave open the idea that not ALL the decisions of the relevant kind need be made in a democratic way: some of these could be made in a non-democratic way and the group still be democratic.

address the issues about mismatch with ordinary notion, paradigms, and KQIE structure (Kind-Quantity, Input Mechanism and Embedding). I say “strange,” because it’s definitely possible to ignore or reject some or all of these. As with all theorizing, there are going to be many choice points along the way, and an adequate account will require making trade-offs. Several of the points above could be ignored or downplayed, but doing so has a cost. Here are some illustrations that also highlight some limitations of the discussion in this book:

- **Ignore what speakers take to be paradigms:** Suppose a definition¹⁰ says that there are no democracies, or that there has only ever been one or two democracies, or more specifically that Norway and HKU’s philosophy department are not democracies. This is not a view I rule out (in fact, in Chapter 7 I argue that a version of this view might be true). If so, we get a massive mismatch with what ordinary speakers want to talk about. Most speakers use “democracy” because they think it’s a term that applies paradigmatically to Norway, etc. If they were to discover that it doesn’t apply to groups like Norway, that would be a consideration in favor of abandonment. Recall from Chapter 2 the comparison to “race”: if it turns out that there are no races, or that only the Amish and the Irish are races, then we have an argument for abandonment (an argument that is strengthened when combined with Can Do Better—see Chapter 2). The same point applies in the other direction: if it turns out that almost all groups, including Harvard, North Korea, Tesla, and *The New York Times* are in the extension of “democracy,” we get a mismatch that, when combined with Can Do Better, also provides an argument for abandonment.
- **Ignore commonality:** Suppose your definition has as a corollary that there’s nothing that the different groups in the extension of “democracy” have in common. Maybe the only way we can express what they have in common is “they are democratic.” This is not an option I’m ruling out, but there’s a lot of work to be done for someone defending this view:
 - First, an important motivation for trying to come up with a definition is to find some commonality. If there’s no definition and no

¹⁰ For simplicity, I’ll talk about definitions, but the point generalizes to theories that don’t provide definitions but instead give “accounts” or “characterizations” or “models” or other theoretical constructs.

commonality, we need to explain how we apply the term to new cases. If it's just a list of groups, with no presumption that the groups have something in common, then how do we decide whether a new group should be added to the list? There are ways to try to answer that question, but there's work to be done to articulate those answers in a theoretically responsible way. For example, vague gestures toward “family resemblance” or “essential contestability” won't suffice (I shall return to these and related ideas in the final chapter).

- It also raises questions about usefulness: if the “democratic” groups don't have anything in common, what does being “pro-democratic” amount to? For those who think being “democratic” is a good-making feature, they want to be able to give a reason. The reason given will typically take this form: “Because democracies have a set of features F, and F is good.” Without a set of features F that democracies have in common, providing a reason that democracy is good will be challenging.
- **Ignore KQIE structure:** One could try to develop a theory of “democracy” that completely ignores the kind and quantity of “democratic” decisions in what's called a “democracy.” That would be a view according to which there's no interesting and informative connection between groups that are “democracies” and the kinds and quantity of “democratic” decisions in that group. While I'm pretty open-minded about the wiggle room that theories have when confronted with data, this kind of view strikes me as so implausible that I won't explore it much in this book. The same can be said for theories according to which the decision-making mechanism (vote, deliberation, and other options) is irrelevant to the status of a group as a “democracy.” My working hypothesis throughout is this: if “democracy” picks out anything, then what it picks out must track decision-making methods (i.e., input), the kind of decisions made in that way (kind), and the number of decisions made in that way (quantity). There might be ways to give an account of “democracy” and “democratic” that ignore these factors, but I can't think of any such ways that are plausible, and so I won't explore that option further here. There is a bit more wiggle room when it comes to ignoring “embedding,” and at various points I'll be exploring views that ignore this feature (invariably with the result that they either massively overgenerate or undergenerate, which then creates a bad form of mismatch).

Important Brief Digression: The “Politics-First” Approach Is a Mistake

I want this book to engage with an extensive body of work on democracy in political philosophy and political science—both theoretical and empirical work. *Almost* all of that work treats “democracy” exclusively as meaning “political democracy.” Such authors would, I suspect, be put off (or at least puzzled) by the demand of providing a *general* account of what a democracy is, and what a democratic decision-making procedure is. Here is a passage from Albert Weale’s book *Democracy* to illustrate the kind of politics-first view that’s fairly common:

The definition I offer may be stated as follows: *in a democracy important public decisions on questions of law and policy depend, directly or indirectly, upon public opinion formally expressed by citizens of the community, the vast bulk of whom have equal political rights. . . . Provided that political representatives can effectively be turned out of office by reasonably regular elections, the political system is a democracy according to the definition I am working with.* (14; my emphasis)

Note that Weale’s definition is not general. It’s an effort to define only “political democracy. As we’ll see in later chapters, Weale is not alone in this political myopia. It’s a common affliction. Many theorists ignore The generality requirement when they try to give definitions of “democracy”:

The generality requirement: many kinds of groups, of varied sizes and varied purposes, can be democracies. Many kinds of decisions, in different settings, made by different kinds of groups, for different purposes, can be democratic.

This point is fundamental: don’t try to understand “democracy” and “democratic” as having new meanings when applied to a domain labeled “political.” Political democracy is an instance of democracy. It’s democracy applied to the political domain. If you don’t understand “democracy” in itself, you don’t understand “political democracy.” At a linguistic level, it’s the adjective “political” modifying “democracy,” in the same way “representative” and “direct” can modify “democracy.” If you don’t understand “democracy” independently of “direct,” you don’t understand “direct democracy.”

If you are tempted towards a definition of ‘democracy’ that’s restricted to the political domain, a first and very serious challenge is to deal with the adjective, ‘democratic’. Politics-firsters almost always ignore the adjective “democratic,” and there’s a clear reason for that. As soon as they focus on the adjective, they are pushed towards abandoning their political myopia. Note, first, that “democratic” isn’t modified in the same ways as “democracy.” There’s no use of “political-democratic.” A decision can be democratic or not, but it can’t be “politically democratic.” Democratic decisions can be made in all kinds of settings: a university, a hospital, a corporation, an NGO, a city, a nation-state, or an intergovernmental organization like the UN. Since even the politics-firsters presumably think that there’s a close connection between “political democracy” and “democratic,” and since “democratic” isn’t politics-restricted, they at least need a non-political account of what it is to be “democratic.”

It’s tempting to see the semantic interaction between “democracy” and “democratic” as reflecting the metaphysical structure of a democracy. What people call “a political democracy” is a structure in which many decisions are made in a democratic way. The fact that a group (a city, an organization, or a country) constitutes a democracy has to do with the kind and quantity of democratic decisions made by that group. So the idea of a democratic decision is more basic: we start with that, and then build up towards “a democracy.” Democratic decisions (and laws, institutions, norms, etc.) are the building blocks of the things we call “democracies.” So “democratic” comes first, then political (and other) democracies.

In the unlikely scenario that I haven’t made this point sufficiently clear, here is an analogy of my argument against politics-first: suppose someone tries to tell you what it is to be red. However, the theory they come up with is all about red cars and how to discover redness in cars. When you point this out, they say: *Right, good observation. We’re just interested in red cars because there are interesting and distinctive features of red cars that you don’t find in, for example, red cups and socks. We’re not denying that things other than cars can be red, but we’re just really interested in cars and so we’ll focus just on those.* Note that there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with being interested in redness only as it applies to cars, but it’s peculiarly parochial and of course presupposes an account of redness *simpliciter*.

A final point about the “politics-first approach”: it relies on a poorly defined notion of “the political.” In addition to all the problems mentioned above, I also don’t think the category of “political” can do much serious theoretical work. A full-scale investigation of “political” would be far too

involved a journey, but just to give a sense of what I have in mind, consider the following points:

- The domain of “the political” obviously can’t be defined in terms of *impact on the collective*. Google, Facebook, the Norwegian Oil Fund, and many other large corporations and organizations make decisions that have much more influence over people’s lives than most “political” decisions made by members of, say, the Norwegian parliament. Still, those decisions are not part of “politics,” or if they are, then, again, Norway is not a political democracy (if that requires the political decisions to be made in a democratic way).
- One could try (as Weale does, following Weber) to define “the political” as the domain that has a “monopoly of legitimate coercive force” (Weale 1999: 222) and that it is a domain of decisions that have “relevance to permanent and basic interests” (21). This won’t work either. First, having a monopoly of legitimate force isn’t a necessary condition on being “political.” It’s at best a contingent feature of how some groups of people deal with disagreement. Surely, there can be democratic decision-making among people who are rational, non-confrontational, and easygoing. They’ll disagree over laws, rules, and decisions, but once the decisions are made in a democratic way, they follow the rules. There is no reason why such people couldn’t have political democracy. There would not, however, be *legitimate use of force*.
- Also note that what people pre-theoretically classify as “political” doesn’t have a monopoly on the use of force. There’s force used in sports (think boxing and other combat sports), prison systems, and military institutions where decisions are not made in the “political” domain.
- Moreover, most political decisions do not affect the permanent and basic interests of anyone. For example, the most heated political debates in the Oslo City Council are about speed bumps and garbage collection. They have nothing to do with permanent and basic structural interests of the citizens of Oslo.

A fully-fledged exploration of “the political” would take me too far afield here, but considerations like those just adduced give some reason to conclude that there isn’t a difference in kind between what we call “the political” and decisions made by multinational corporations, large organizations, etc. Of course, none of this is to deny that there are special features of, for example, the decision-making that happens in the parliament of a big country.

However, even that’s not a particularly unified category of decision-making. There is lots to be said about voting in the English Parliament versus the US Senate versus Oslo City Council. All three entities have distinctive features. Do not, however, infer from this that there’s an irreducible sense of “English democracy” or “American democracy” or “Oslo democracy” that doesn’t depend on understanding what it is to be democratic *simpliciter*.

Expressive and Normative Dimensions

The expressive and normative dimensions of “democracy” and “democratic” are complex and difficult to understand. In this brief section, I’ll simply point to two factors that strike me as plausibly shared data points for any theory; I’ll do so by trying to remain theoretically neutral.

Expressive uses: Many of those who use “democracy” and “democratic” do so, at least in part, to express approval or disapproval. In a setting where there’s broad consensus that something called “democratic” is a good thing, an utterance of the form:

1. “That’s undemocratic!”

can serve to express *disapproval*. The purpose of utterance 1 need not be primarily to neutrally describe features of the event in question. The aim is (for some utterances of 1) to make a negative normative judgment. Similarly, there are many contexts (both practical and theoretical) where an utterance of 2 is an expression of *approval*:

2. “That’s democratic!”

In many settings, speakers will expect an utterance of 2 to be an indicator of *approval*.

However, the points above apply only to *some* uses of the expressions ‘democratic’ and ‘undemocratic.’ Approval/disapproval is expressed only in certain kinds of settings, and thus isn’t part of the meaning of the expression. Imagine a group of people devoted to the promotion of meritocracy. They all agree with Plato that democracy is a disaster, and that decision-making should be in the hands of only those who are skilled and competent. Among this group, an utterance of “that’s undemocratic” could be an expression of approval, and an utterance of “that’s democratic” could be an expression of condemnation. This is evidence that “democratic” *itself* is *normatively neutral*: a positive assessment isn’t built into its meaning. There’s overwhelming evidence of this: even those who are very positive about democratic

decision-making will *never* be universally so. Whether X being democratic is, on balance, a good-making feature of X depends on what X is, and the setting of X. Suppose again that X is the act of piloting a plane or conducting brain surgery. Even the most gung-ho lover of democratic decision-making would agree that it would be disastrous for those activities to be guided by votes, sortition, consultations, or other kinds of democratic procedures. In those settings, we want the answer to the question “Is it democratic?” to be a resounding “No.” Moreover, to insist that the very meaning of “democratic” has built into it a positive assessment would be to imply that those who have been arguing against democracy for the past 2,000 years have been ignorant of that aspect of the word’s meaning. Even if you disagree with the Platonic tradition, you shouldn’t attribute to its proponents an inability to understand the words “democracy,” “democratic,” and other cognates.

A fully-fledged account of the normative and expressive dimensions of uses of “democratic,” “democracy,” “non-democratic,” etc. would require backing by a theory of the fact-value distinction, a detailed comparison to what Bernard Williams called “thick normative concepts,” and also an account of normativity itself. All of that would take us beyond the scope of what I can do in this book. That said, it’s not much of a stretch to rely on the following guiding principles:¹¹

Principle of lexical neutrality: The meanings of the expressions ‘democratic’ and ‘democracy’ are normatively neutral—their meanings don’t encode a normative assessment.

Contextual Normativity: In some contexts, utterances of the expressions ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic’ carry significant normative weight—they are used to express assessments.

In this respect, “democracy” and “democratic” are like “socialism” and “capitalism.” To a lot of people, the description of something as “socialism”

¹¹ One of the few texts that explicitly brings this up is Christiano’s (2008) entry on democracy in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and Christiano takes it as obvious that the term should be defined in a normatively neutral way. There’s an influential trend in the literature that denies this, however. Work on essentially contested concepts, beginning with Gallie (1956) has held that democracy is such a concept “par excellence” and that such concepts are normative. Subsequent work by people in concept formation in political science has responded to this (e.g., Collier, already cited in Chapter 1). And subsequent work in philosophy has suggested, to the extent that essentially contested concepts even make sense as a class, that normativity isn’t a feature of these concepts (Väyrynen 2014). I discuss ‘essentially contested concepts’ further in Chapter 12.

communicates a negative value judgment, because they share background assumptions about socialism. There are other people who don't share those background assumptions, and for them a description of something as “socialism” can be normatively neutral or positive. The same goes for “capitalism.” Speakers who share certain normative background assumptions can use “That's capitalism” to express a form of approval. Those with different background assumptions can use it in a normatively neutral or negative way. So, both “socialism” and “capitalism” are descriptive in the same way that “democracy” is.

Lexical Effects and the Shibboleth Effect

In this section, I shall expand on a point which is in effect a continuation of the previous point, and I shall elaborate further on the expressive power of (some uses of) “democracy” and “democratic.” Contemplate the following words:

Diarrhea
Hitler
sex

Most of us will have a broad range of reactions to these words—reactions that go far beyond the meaning of the words. They trigger emotions, associations, and memories. They can make you disgusted, upset, angry, excited, sad, or happy. There's evidence from priming studies that they can affect motivation and actions in a broad range of ways.¹² In earlier work (Cappelen 2018), I tried to identify a set of effects—lexical effects. These are non-cognitive and cognitive effects that go beyond semantics and pragmatics. Think of “lexical effects” as a grab bag category that includes all effects of language that linguists and philosophers typically leave out of their systematic theorizing. Semantics and pragmatics are entirely focused on communicated contents. These can take the form of literal content, implicated content, presupposed content, metaphorical content, etc. However, words have additional effects, and many of these are non-cognitive (or at least not

¹² A recent such study is Neumann and Lozo (2012). A helpful review is Janiszewski and Wyer Jr. (2014). Of course, priming studies in general (of the sort made famous by Kahneman's popular *Thinking Fast and Slow*) has been one of the most salient victims of the replicability crisis.

content-specific): the presence of the above three words triggers feelings, emotions, memories, mental images, and many other things. A lot of these effects will vary massively between contexts and individuals, and this variation will not lend itself to systematic theorizing. For example, for me, the words “Peder” and “Nora” are always very salient and emotional, and that has to do with my specific history and life. Those words might have very little or no effect on others.

Lexical effects are *extremely* powerful. Two illustrations:

- At the time of writing, The Coca-Cola Company is worth about US\$80 billion. It is estimated that about 80–90 percent of that value is due to its ownership (copyright) of the name “Coca-Cola.”¹³ One way to think about the central goal of the endless commercials and advertising campaigns for Coca-Cola is as follows: their aim is, in large part, to create positive lexical effects of the word “Coca-Cola.” The aim of those effects is to get people to buy Coca-Cola. It’s working. It has been a spectacular success. Most of the advertisement for Coca-Cola is not an effort to convince people through arguments that it’s a superior beverage. It’s to make people feel good in various ways when they hear and think about “Coca-Cola.”
- Initially, Covid-19 variants were named after the locations where they were first discovered. There was extensive use of terms such as “the UK variant,” “the South African variant,” etc. Even though these were just names, the effects were obvious: a deadly disease became associated with a particular location. Those associations created a stigma. To counter this, the WHO introduced new terminology using Greek letters rather than place names:

From now on the WHO will use Greek letters to refer to variants first detected in countries like the UK, South Africa and India. The UK variant for instance is labelled as Alpha, the South African Beta, and the Indian as Delta. The WHO said this was to simplify discussions but also to help remove some stigma from the names.¹⁴

The stigma generated by the initial labeling is an instance of a powerful negative lexical effect, which is the reverse of what The Coca-Cola Company has tried to create for its name.

¹³ <http://aswathdamodaran.blogspot.com/2013/10/the-brand-name-advantage-valuable.html>.

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-57308592>.

I bring this point up because “democracy” and “democratic” have strong lexical effects, which make a big impact on how and why these terms are used. They are a standard part of political propaganda, and a core element of extremely emotionally loaded activities. Terms such as “democracy” and “non-democracy” regularly occur on posters and are screamed as slogans. They have over and over again been used as justifications for wars—some justified, but mostly unjustified (think of the second Iraq War, which the second Bush touted as bringing democracy to Iraq; see, among much else, Diamond 2007). Moreover, “democracy” has a specific kind of lexical effect: to extensively use “democracy” in a certain way¹⁵ is a method of expressing allegiance to a certain team—“team democracy.” In Brennan’s book *Against Democracy*, he describes a category of voters that he calls “hooligans.” Here are some of his descriptions of hooligans:

Their political opinions form part of their identity, and they are proud to be a member of their political team. For them, belonging to the Democrats or Republicans, Labor or Tories, or social Democrats or Christian Democrats matters to their self image in the same way being a Christian or a Muslim matters to religious people’s self image.... Our commitment to our team can override our commitment to truth or morality.... What matters are rhetoric, sex appeal, and promoting the team. When hooligans deliberate they get *worse*. (Brennan 2016: 5)

Brennan’s focus is on the epistemic deficiencies of hooligans. There is, however, also an associated linguistic deficiency. The aim of their speech isn’t to articulate coherent thoughts, but instead to express various emotive states, and in particular to signal team membership. That applies not just to the kinds of teams Brennan mentions (Republicans vs. Democrats, Labour vs. Tories, etc.), but also for those who are pro-democracy, that is are on team democracy. Many uses of “democracy” have as their primary function not expressing coherent thoughts, but just signaling that the speaker is on “team democracy.” From the point of view of such speakers, it makes little difference whether their speech is meaningful—as long as making those sounds indicates their allegiance, they’ve achieved their primary goal.

¹⁵ Primarily, at the moment, this takes the form of complaining that countries or entities are not being democratic, with the understanding that this implies criticism. Relatedly, that politicians with little esteem for democracy brand themselves as “democratic” suggests it’s universally positively valenced.

This is not to say that those who utter these sentences don't have some descriptive content in mind when they utter "democratic" and "democracy." The point is that this kind of use in part serves the purpose of getting the audience to recognize that the speaker has certain political allegiances, and that is meant to have a certain motivational force. This is connected to the point above about the expressive power of "democracy" and "democratic": one way to understand why many uses of these terms have the appearance of expressing norms is that they function to express team allegiance. I'll call this the Shibboleth Effect of (some uses of) "democracy." Consider, for example, this utterance by Donald Trump:

"I'm not the one trying to undermine American democracy," Mr. Trump told a cheering crowd after falsely accusing Democrats of stealing the 2020 election and railing against mail-in and absentee voting. "I'm the one who's trying to save it. Please remember that."

Suppose, contrary to what I argue, that "democracy" is a coherent notion. Maybe, for example, as Christiano suggests, it picks out a form of collective decision-making in which participants are treated as equals at certain but essential points in the decision-making procedure.¹⁶ Even if this is the descriptive content of the term, it is very unlikely that this is what Trump was primarily trying to convey in this utterance. It's pretty obvious that he was not trying to convey that he is the one trying to save a decision-making procedure that is characterized by a certain kind of equality at an essential stage. Rather, what he is trying to do is something like this: signal that he is a savior of, and therefore also a leader of, team democracy. Team democracy, so understood, is big: it contains both the Republicans and the Democrats. The purpose of Trump's speech was not to describe his role in defending a certain kind of subtle, collective decision-making procedure, but to signal or express that he is, or aims to be, the leader of a team, and that others are undermining that team.

Genealogy and Athens as an Anchoring Point

The history of an expression can determine its semantic and communicative properties in many ways. Before going into the genealogy of

¹⁶ For criticism of that view, see the next chapter.

“democracy,” some brief remarks on ways that history can be relevant to meaning and communication.

On the Importance of History

Metasemantics is the study of how words get the meaning they have. It’s the study of that in virtue of which an expression, say, “democracy,” picks out what it picks out. There are many conflicting metasemantic theories.¹⁷ They all propose a set of conditions, C, such that the C conditions relevant to E determine E’s meaning. Take the expression “Bruglighet.” You might not know this, but there’s no language in the world where that expression means anything. It fails to satisfy C in all existing languages. “Svinepels,” however, does satisfy conditions for meaningfulness in Norwegian, even though it’s an expression used very little and by very few.

Some of the leading metasemantic theories are explicitly historical. This is most obviously so for theories in the Kripkean tradition. In a Kripkean framework, an expression goes from not being meaningful to being meaningful through a process that starts with an introductory event. Kripke calls these introductory events “dubbings.” However, I like to think of these more broadly as anchoring events, and they can take a variety of forms. Once a semantic anchor is in place, that expression (with its meaning) can be passed along in a linguistic community. When things go well, meaning is preserved when new speakers learn the language. They use the expression with the meaning it had at the beginning of the chain. This process is compatible with there being unmooring and then re-anchoring.

¹⁷ Thus, though the members of the following list are neither exclusive nor exhaustive, there are causal chain theories of name meaning (Kripke 1980; Evans 1973, 1982), themselves attempting to correct defects of descriptivist theories (Frege 1892, Russell 1905); for a recent set of overview articles that covers all of the above and more, see Biggs and Geirsson (2020); there are theories in which the nature of the environment (Putnam 1975), or the use of other speakers, either all (Williamson 1994) use theories in general, or a privileged expert subset (Burge 1979) determines reference; there are theories which take a speaker’s intentions to be determinative, either for meaning in general (the Gricean program, a *locus classicus* of which is Grice 1989; see also Neale 1992) or for a subset of expressions such as demonstratives (Kaplan 1989). There are teleosemantic theories that appeal to the evolutionary forces in light of which representation developed (see Neander 2004 for an overview; Millikan 1984 and much else; Papineau 1990), interpretativist theorists that take meaning to be something attributed to a speaker by an observer as part of a theory that attempts to explain their behavior (Davidson 1973, Williams 2020); and more many besides.

In other theories,¹⁸ speakers' beliefs play a more significant role in reference determination than they do for the Kripkean externalist. Without going into the details of these alternatives or their motivations, note that even on these kinds of views history will play an important role for several reasons:

- Suppose you endorse a metasemantics according to which the speakers' beliefs about E are relevant to the meaning of an expression. Here is an initial choice point: *Option 1*—speakers' beliefs should include only the beliefs of the speakers that exist right now and the beliefs that these speakers have right now; or *Option 2*—speakers' beliefs should also include past speakers' beliefs, as well as the past beliefs of contemporary speakers. Option 1 seems unmotivated, so we should go for Option 2.
- Moreover, the beliefs that are being appealed to will require understanding history, because those beliefs are often about history. One of the beliefs that many people have about the thing called "democracy" is *that it's the sort of thing that they had in Athens about 2,000 or so years ago*. Since that's one of the relevant beliefs, you need to know what happened in Athens 2,000 years ago. In general, a lot of the mental states that, according to the non-Kripkeans, are relevant for determining the extension of "democracy" will be historical, and so, as a result, facts about history will be relevant.

The above points concern meaning-determination of expressions used by contemporary speakers, but of course we're also interested in interpreting utterances that were made in the past. Most of the interesting sayings happened in the past. When we interpret these past utterances, history is relevant in two ways:

- a) The utterances are in the past, and so we need to understand history to understand them. This makes history relevant in an obvious way: they are history, and so history matters.

¹⁸ These range from full-blown content internalists, to causal descriptivists (Lewis 1986, Kroon 1987) and two-dimensional semanticists (Chalmers 2006; less full-throated 2-D semanticists include Stalnaker; see Soames 2007 for a taxonomy); to the Canberra planners (for references and introduction, see Braddon-Mitchell and Nola 2009, for whom denotations are fixed for the terms in a domain by Ramsification over the platitudes true of that domain). Moving slightly away from language, philosophers of mind have thought it necessary to make reference to "narrow content" (Fodor 1987; Kriegel 2008; Segal 2000).

- b) These past utterances and their interpretations are relevant not only in order to understand past speakers but also in order to understand contemporary speakers, because present speakers want (at least in many cases) to talk about what *they* talked about. We want to continue their lines of inquiry and, in the case of politics, promote, defend, and refine their political structure. In other words, our speech is in part parasitic on the meaning of past utterances.

Here is an illustration of the ways in which history and past use matter, and also of how messy and complicated things get. Many people think of the United States of America as a paradigmatic democracy. They're surprised, therefore, when they find out that many of the so-called “founding fathers” were—and here we have to be careful—opposed to democracy, or, to put it more carefully, opposed to what they called “democracy.” Here are some choice quotations:

- “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.”
John Adams
- “Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their death.” James Madison
- “The experience of all former ages had shown that of all human governments, democracy was the most unstable, fluctuating and short-lived.” John Quincy Adams
- “The republican is the only form of government which is not eternally at open or secret war with the rights of mankind.” Thomas Jefferson

These passages might give you pause: how can the founders of America be opposed to democracy, if the United States is a paradigmatic beacon of democracy? In order to answer this, you need history, and this history matters if you want to know whether America is a democracy. Here are some options you have:

- Option 1: Reinterpret their use of ‘democracy’ to not mean democracy. Alan Ryan (2012) proposes that their use of ‘democracy’ means what our use of ‘direct democracy’ means. He says, “none of the leading figures in the founding thought direct democracy desirable; nobody,

Jefferson included, thought democracy (as then understood) was possible on a national scale.”

- Option 2: They really were against democracy. Their word “democracy” meant democracy. The passages above expressed their belief that democracy is a bad form of governance. However, they had some false beliefs about democracy. In particular, they thought democracy had to be direct, and that what we call “representative democracy” wasn’t democracy. That’s the false belief that underlies their opposition to democracy.

No matter which Option you go for, it needs to be backed by historical evidence, and both options are problematic:

- Option 1 is problematic because there doesn’t seem to be some period in history where a decision was made to change the meaning of the word “democracy.” Speakers were using it continuously, with the intention for it to mean what it meant before. In other words, there was a continuous intention to *preserve meaning*. How, then, can the hypothesized change have happened? Even if you have an answer to that challenge—that is, you think there was a period of time in which the meaning changed despite there being no such intention—you’ll need an account of what “democracy” means today (because you’re saying the current meaning is different from the meaning it had when Jefferson spoke). The hardest part of this follow-up challenge is familiar: if you claim there was a meaning change, you need a way to distinguish that from widespread changes in beliefs about democracy. Suppose you think that Trump, Biden, and Putin have very different views about democracy. Then you think that there’s a something—democracy—about which they have differing views. If they just meant different things by “democracy,” then there would be no disagreement. Those who think that Jefferson, Madison, and Adams meant something by “democracy” that is different from what we mean have to explain why that difference is not just an instance of difference in beliefs.
- On the other hand, if we favor Option 2, what’s the evidence that they were wrong? Maybe the contemporary view is wrong, and all those who support representative democracy are wrong (because “democracy” can only be direct—as the founding fathers [on this interpretation] thought).

So, linguistic genealogy can matter. However, genealogies typically end up as interesting, but semantically pointless, anecdotes about what people

believe and what kinds of theories they develop, or as stories about how concepts might have arisen or been justified.¹⁹ Some changes in beliefs and theories can contribute to semantic changes, but if that’s the case we need the genealogies to be focused on those particular changes, not on random changes in conceptions and theorizing. We need genealogies that sharply distinguish semantically relevant from semantically irrelevant changes in beliefs and theorizing. It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that these genealogies don’t yet exist (in large part because we don’t know how to draw the relevant distinction; semantically relevant genealogy is extremely hard to write because we don’t have a good enough grasp of how to pick out the semantically relevant parts of history).

A Brief History of “Democracy”

Many theorists trace the anchoring for “democracy” to a pattern of decision-making in a certain period of Athens’ history. The facts are well known. Here is a brief description from Alan Ryan:

The key to Athenian democracy was the Assembly, or *ecclesia*. It was in modern terms legislature, judiciary, and executive, and there was no appeal against its decisions except to a later meeting of itself. Although its potential membership was 40,000, it operated through many smaller bodies, through courts of 500 members, and in particular through the 500 members of the governing council, or *boule*, whose members formed the Athenian administration for a year, and the *prytany*, the 30-strong body whose members formed the managing committee of the *boule* for a month at a time. Both bodies were chosen by lottery. Ryan (2012), p. 65

He goes on to note:

Given the small number of citizens and the large number of posts to be filled, ordinary Athenians had a good chance of being the equivalent of president of Athens for at least one day in a lifetime, and a member of the “cabinet” for a month.

¹⁹ For some discussion of the nature, and potential limitations, of genealogy, see Williams (2002: ch. 2), and especially Queloz (2021: 48 ff.).

The Athenian polis was wildly different from ours in its organization. Although not mentioned above, the franchise was limited to about 10 percent of the population (it varied a bit over time). Women and slaves were excluded. So, 80–90 percent of the population were ruled by a small minority of property-owning men. Most of what we think of as the “democratic” processes happened in the form of voting in the Assembly, with sortition playing a significant role in filling important positions (positions that would give the person power to make decisions on behalf of everyone else in the community).

It should be clear that this system was nothing even remotely like what we think of as a contemporary instance of democracy. If you squint, you can see elements of it, but, with clear eyes, Athens did not instantiate an admirable form of collective decision-making. To squint it into something admirable, you have to, at the very least, overlook the exclusion of 80–90 percent of the population. However, that’s a strange thing to overlook, since it is one of the most salient parts of the system, and it’s hard to imagine it existing without that part for any significant period of time.

In order to use this alleged paradigm of “democratic” decision-making, we have to make a series of decisions about what features of it are important, replicable, and potentially essential to any form of decision-making that falls into the extension of “democracy” and “democratic.” One central challenge in doing that is to find some core features of Athens that can characterize both small units (a family, a philosophy department) and something as big as India. Those trying to do so are often engaging in what I shall call “normative sneak”:

- Advocates of democracy tend to choose the essential features of Athenian democracy by picking what they take to be good and admirable features.
- Opponents of democracy tend to choose the essential features of Athenian democracy by picking what they consider flawed features.

One way to think of this idea: proponents of democracy want us to focus on the positive features of Athens because they want “democracy” to have a meaning that makes the concept pick out something good. Opponents of democracy, on the other hand, want us to focus on the negative features of Athens because they want “democracy” to pick out a defective form of collective decision-making. Plato exemplifies this latter tendency. His objection to democracy, however, didn’t have anything to do with the exclusion

of 80–90 percent of the population. It had to do with the ignorance and flimsiness of the 10 percent making the decisions. Throughout the *Republic*, Plato compares the state to the soul, and argues that the state can be out of balance, in the same way as the soul. The details of Plato’s theory of the soul can be ignored here, since I just want to highlight the feature of democracy that is salient to him: the disunity of the democratic soul. Plato writes:

he lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour; and sometimes he is lapped in drink and strains of the flute; then he becomes a water-drinker, and tries to get thin; then he takes a turn at gymnastics; sometimes idling and neglecting everything, then once more living the life of a philosopher; often he is busy with politics, and starts to his feet and says and does whatever comes into his head; and, if he is emulous of any one who is a warrior, off he is in that direction, or of men of business, once more in that. His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so he goes on.

Plato argued that, from this form of governance, tyranny would inevitably follow—“tyranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme forms of liberty.” I don’t want to get into Plato exegesis here, but the important point is this: *for Plato, the salient feature of “that kind of governance” (where “that” denotes his contemporary Athens) is extreme instability that leads to tyranny.* Of course, those who like democracy and want it to be anchored in Athenian democracy tend to latch on to other features of what went on in Athens 2,000 years ago. They ignore the exclusion of most of the population (often by redescribing Athens as a democracy in which “all citizens” can participate, and considering it irrelevant that “citizens” constituted just a tiny minority of the population), and instead pick features that they find admirable and inspiring.

Methodologically, the lesson I want to take from these very brief remarks is the following puzzle (if a puzzle can be a lesson):

If ‘democratic’ denotes anything, it’s a method for making collective decisions. What’s the method, and what are the socioeconomic-historical conditions presupposed by that method? One option is to appeal to a few people who made a few decisions in a small city state 2,000 years ago in what’s now Greece. If that’s the relevant procedure, we need to pick out the relevant features of how they made those collective decisions. There are

indefinitely many candidate features. We could focus on the fact that 10 percent of the population made decisions for the other 90 percent. We could focus on the fact that decisions were made during assemblies, or that decision-makers were elected through sortition. Or we could focus on the fact that ‘all citizens’ had a say in decision-making. It looks like the choice will be determined, in part, by whether one is pro-democracy or anti-democracy. Here’s the puzzle: both of those categories assume that there’s something—democracy—that the respective groups are pro and anti. We need democracy to be something before that debate even gets off the ground. But then the debate is sort of pointless, because we were supposed to be looking for features that are semantically determining for ‘democracy’. I return to this and related issues below.

Lack of Convergence among Experts

Finally, I’ll briefly introduce a point that I shall return to later. In many scientific and theoretical domains, there’s a group of people recognized as experts, and that group converges on the definitions of certain key terms within their discipline. Think of terms such as “inflation,” “crista,” and “Ohm’s law.” They are used in disciplines in which there’s a reasonably clear way to identify experts, and in which the experts converge on definitions. So, for this method to work, we need two features to be in place:

- (i) a recognized and agreed-upon mechanism for establishing expertise within a field;
- (ii) the experts converging on definitions.

Whether a discipline satisfies (i) will be a matter of degree, as will whether a particular term satisfies (ii). However, even with those qualifications in mind, it’s clear that theorists about “democracy” are very far from converging on a definition of terms like “democracy” and “democratic.” This is broadly agreed upon by everyone familiar with the literature. There are diverging definitions, and no methodology for establishing convergence. Moreover, even though there are experts on democracy, citizens are likely to disagree on who counts as an expert on “democracy,” and will be guided by their first-order political views in assessing expertise. I return to this issue below.

Looking Ahead

The goal of this chapter has been to draw the reader’s attention to a large number of interesting and underexplored features of the expression “democracy.” I don’t know of any systematic effort to put all of this together into a unified theory. For those who want to understand “democracy” (and so democracy), this is a rich and very open field of research. The conclusion I shall draw in the next couple of chapters is a negative one: I doubt the English language really has fixed on a particular KQIE structure. If a KQIE value has been fixed, it’s likely to be very different from what speakers think it is; that is, it leads to massive mismatch. I’ll consider the possibility that the expressions are used primarily in order to exploit their lexical effects, and, correspondingly, the possibility that this is one reason why they fail to express any cognitive contents. To top it off, I show that “democracy” and cognitive expressions end up generating endless amounts of verbal disputes and faux (dis)agreements. I then go on in Chapter 8 to show how easy it is to do better. However, if you find these conclusions unpalatable and unjustified, it would advance our understanding of “democracy” (and so democracy) if there were many and competing efforts to model (some of) the data in this chapter.

PART III
ABANDONMENT OF
“DEMOCRACY”?

7

Problems with “Democracy”

This and the next chapter present a twofold argument in favor of abandoning the D-words:

This chapter: The negative part—The D-words are defective both semantically and communicatively.

Chapters 8 and 9: How to do better—It is easy to do better than the D-words. We already have superior terminology that is easily accessible.

Each of these arguments is powerful on its own. If the D-words are deeply defective, then we should abandon them. If we can do better using other terminology, then we should. However, the combined effect of these considerations is a strong, but still defeasible, argument for abolitionism.

Introduction: Semantic Failures

Semantics, broadly construed, is the study of the meanings of expressions, and how those expressions can combine to create new meanings. Unfortunately, we have no consensus about what meanings are, or how expressions get them. In the light of that, I work with some minimal assumptions that should be fairly non-controversial, and should be more or less common ground between a broad range of diverging theories: nouns and adjectives, such as “democracy” and “democratic,” have extensions. The extension of “democracy” is the set of things that are democracies. The extension of “democratic” is the set of events, institutions, etc. that are democratic. Their intensions are functions that specify the extensions these expressions would have had, had the world been different in various ways. Intensions are functions, from points of evaluation to extensions.¹ I’m going

¹ I’ll be neutral on just how to understand points of evaluation here: they are whatever parameters need to be specified in order to determine an intension. For languages with tense,

to assume that when someone utters “Norway is a democracy,” that’s true because Norway is in the extension of “democracy.” When someone says about a particular decision, “That was democratic,” it is true if the demonstrated decision is in the extension of “democratic,” and false if it is not. It is a broadly shared assumption that this categorization is at least one element of what we can call “the meaning” of an expression. It is also an assumption that’s needed to capture some of the most important pre-theoretic assumptions about language: we can use sentences of the form “A is G” to talk about A, and what we have said is true if the thing that “A” stands for has the property that “G” picks out.²

In what follows, I present arguments in favor of two kinds of semantic failures of the D-words:

- **Primary hypothesis:** “democracy” and “democratic” are meaningless.
- **Secondary, backup hypothesis:** “democracy” and “democratic” are meaningful, but their meanings give rise to massive mismatch (e.g., nothing is in the extension of “democracy,” or almost every group is).

It might seem a bit weird and unusual that I can’t make up my mind about which of these hypotheses is correct. One reason for this indecision is that I take seriously the fact that our current understanding of the nature of meaning and communication is fragile and tentative. We have no dominant theory, and the various contenders don’t give clear conclusions in particular cases. This is in large part because what to say about a particular case will depend on complex empirical facts that are not easily (or even in principle) available to us.³ As a result, this is a domain where we are well served to avoid dogmatism and not aim for knockdown arguments. Note, however, that this point goes in both directions: both abolitionists and preservationists should take these limitations seriously.

we might need time points of assessment; for languages with epistemic modals, we might need epistemically possible world points of assessment.

² That said, there are people who think about semantics and meaning in different ways, and what I have to say in this chapter can easily be reformulated in other terminology and frameworks.

³ This is a lesson from the literature on metasemantic externalism in general, and one that should constrain our theorizing about language (for some discussion in the context of conceptual engineering, see my Cappelen 2018: ch. 7).

Most Likely Hypothesis: “Democracy” and “Democratic” Are Meaningless

In the next few pages I’ll rely on some of the material I summarized at the end of Chapter 6. As a reminder, here are the key points. There are broadly agreed-on **paradigms**. Speakers use “democracy” because they think it is a term that applies to collectives such as Canada, Norway, the HKU philosophy department, and various organizations and corporations. In other words, groups of various sizes and with various functions can be democracies. The flip side of this idea is that the meaning of “democracy” should be such that it excludes groups such as Harvard, Tesla, *The New York Times*, and North Korea. For the adjective “democratic,” we need an account of how particular decisions can be democratic (even when they are not made in a democracy), as well as of how values, laws, traditions, and cultures can be democratic. Speakers also assume that the paradigms have something in common.

Many types of groups are in the extension of “democracy”: organizations, clubs, universities, cities, states, countries, and many other collectives that make joint decisions. The meaning of democracy should illuminate what these groups all have in common: what makes them all democracies (or, if they have nothing in common, then explain why they are classified together as “democracies”). The same goes for “democratic”: many kinds of decisions can be democratic, from the election of a president to the decision about whom to appoint to the PTA. The meaning of “democratic” should illuminate what these decisions have in common—what makes them democratic (or if there’s nothing they have in common, then the meaning should explain why they are nonetheless all classified as “democratic” decisions).

In Chapter 6 I described how the D-words are meant to track certain basic features of collective decision-making: kind, quantity, input-mechanism, and embedding:

- a. **Kind-question:** We want to know what kinds of decisions among some group *G*’s members need to be made in a democratic way in order for *G* to be a democracy. There’s an analogous point to be made about “democratic” decisions: decisions are complex events with many stages, participants, and processes. We need an account of the kind of stage at which the democratic process (whatever that is) needs to occur.

- b. **Quantity-question:** Suppose we have an answer to the kind-question for both “democracy” and “democratic.” We can then ask: how many of the collective K-decisions must be made in a democratic way in order for G to be “democratic”? Again, there’s an analog at the level of specific decisions.
- c. **Input-mechanism:** In talking about kind and quantity, I have presupposed that there are some input-mechanisms that would make particular decisions democratic. The meaning of “democratic” should illuminate what these various mechanisms have in common, and what makes them democratic.
- d. **Embedding-question:** Kind, quantity, and input-mechanisms alone are not sufficient to determine whether a group is a democracy (or a decision is democratic). A lot will also depend on how these mechanisms are embedded in a larger cultural, historical, and social setting.

I refer to the Kind-Quantity-Input-and-Embedding structure as the KQIE structure. To say that “democracy” has an extension is to say that it divides groups into those that are democratic and those that are not. If an extension assignment was completely oblivious to the KQIE structure, it wouldn’t be a meaning for “democracy.”⁴

The two hypotheses I’ll address in this section are focused on the question of whether, and how, the KQIE values have been settled. According to the first option, they haven’t been settled (and the expressions “democracy” and “democratic” lack meaning). According to the second hypothesis, they have been fixed, but in ways that create a mismatch between the meanings of the D-words and what speakers want to talk about.

Here is the No-Meaning Hypothesis:

- **The No-Meaning Hypothesis:** The meaning-determining mechanisms (whatever they may be) failed to give a meaning to “democracy” and “democratic.”

Before I give arguments for the No-Meaning Hypothesis, I’ll say a bit more about just how I want it to be interpreted, and the methodology I use to argue for it.

⁴ See the subsection “The Cost of Ignoring Paradigms, Commonality, and KQIE Structure” in Chapter 6 for arguments in favor of this point.

Clarifying the No-Meaning Hypothesis and Methodological Preamble

The No-Meaning Hypothesis is **not** the claim that values for KQIE have been determined, but that they are empty (i.e., pick out no actual cases), or fail to satisfy commonality and paradigms. It contrasts, therefore, with the case of “race” discussed in Chapter 2. Here, again, is Mallon’s summary of Appiah and Zack:

Racial skeptics, such as Anthony Appiah (1995, 1996) and Naomi Zack (1993, 2002) contend that the term race cannot refer to anything real in the world, since the one thing in the world to which the term could uniquely refer—discrete, essentialist, biological races—have been proven not to exist.

On this view, “race” *has a meaning*: it’s supposed to pick out groups of people who share certain significant genetic properties. It turns out there are no such groups, and so there are no races. Therefore, we should abandon “race” (because using an empty term creates mismatch—see Chapter 2). The No-Meaning Hypothesis is more radical: it’s the claim that the metasemantics failed to even establish conditions that could be fulfilled or not fulfilled. The failure is therefore more fundamental than the failure of “race” (at least as laid out by the view that Mallon calls “racial skepticism”).

If the No-Meaning Hypothesis is correct, the D-words are also more defective than the kinds of gruesome predicates introduced by Nelson Goodman in *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*. Goodman introduced two new predicates, “grue” and “bleen” and defined them as follows:

an object is **grue** if and only if it is observed before t and is green, or else is not so observed and is blue. An object is “bleen” if and only if it is observed before t and is blue, or else is not so observed and is green.

Whatever views one might have about “grue” and “bleen,” they at least have meaning. They were successfully defined by Goodman and that meaning has stuck. People who have continued discussing those terms and their implication for, for example, induction, have done so by using those terms with the meanings Goodman gave them. The D-words, according to the No-Meaning Hypothesis, are even more defective than “grue.”

In general, there should be no big surprise that failures of this kind occur. There are certain conditions that must be in place for an expression to be meaningful. We philosophers have developed a variety of theories about what exactly those conditions are. Whatever the correct account turns out to be, it will specify conditions that expressions can fail to meet. No expression is guaranteed meaningfulness. That some speakers believe a term is meaningful is (maybe) some evidence that it is, but far from conclusive evidence.

Big picture:

The D-Words might or might not have a meaning. There are infinitely many possible meanings they could have. Even if we focus only on those constructed by setting the varying KQIE values, there are infinitely many possible meanings (for different values of each of K, Q, I, and E). What enables an expression to have an extension are some mechanisms—the meaning-determining mechanisms. The considerations I’m about to go through are supposed to make it plausible that, in this particular case, those mechanisms have failed: no extension was determined.

There are several ways to go about arguing for this.

- One option is to pick a particular metasemantic theory, and then show that, according to it, there’s no meaning here. That’s a strategy Sally Haslanger (in, e.g., her 2005), for example, uses. The problem with that strategy is that the argument then becomes hostage to a particular metasemantic theory, and those are always very controversial. Speakers tend to have less confidence in those theories than they have in the meaningfulness of an entrenched expression.
- Another option, illustrated in, for example, Appiah (1996), is to go through a variety of metasemantic theories and show that it’s meaningless on all of them. Appiah picks two—a form of externalism and a form of descriptivism. Again, the problem is that there are many more than two options, and each of those comes in many different flavors. So going through them all gets very messy, tedious, and at the end of the day the results end up being very unclear.

There is also a structural problem with these approaches: they’re top-down, not bottom-up. By that I mean that they start with a theoretical framework, and then in a somewhat mechanical way apply this framework

to particular cases. However, the evidence for the framework comes from investigation of particular cases in the first place. These general theories are supported to the extent that they get particular cases right. What counts as a theory getting a particular case right doesn't depend only on the theory, because that would be circular. To some extent at least, theorizing starts with reflection on particular cases. The case studies are often relatively simple examples like “Godel,” “gold,” and “water.” Terms that have the kind of social and political significance that “democracy” does will raise their own set of issues. That's another reason why it's a bad idea to start reflections in this domain with a simple top-down application of a pre-existing framework: few pre-existing frameworks have been developed for these kinds of deeply social and political terms.

Rather than starting with general metasemantic principles, I'll present five considerations in favor of No-Meaning. I call them “considerations” to highlight that they are not conclusive evidence of No-Meaning. I don't think we're clear enough on the nature of meaning to make any confident claims like that. They are just data points and hypotheses that, without building on a particular metasemantic theory, make No-Meaning plausible. The five considerations are:

1. Unbridgeable gap between simplicity and complexity.
2. Semantic distractions—extensive exploitations of lexical effects.
3. Normative disagreements that lead to semantic disagreements.
4. Disagreements and lack of expert deference.
5. No natural kind of KQIE structures to gravitate toward.

Consideration 1: Unbridgeable Gap between Simplicity and Complexity

Suppose a practice of using the D-words started with some paradigmatic single decisions that were classified as being “democratic.” Those could have been decisions about what to have for dinner, or where to plant tomatoes. The term was introduced to denote some features of that kind of decision. It was then extended to more complex decisions with many stages, a few of which shared some features with those original, simple paradigms. Then small groups started being characterized as “democracies” if a relevant number of their decisions in certain settings were democratic. We're already

in somewhat shaky territory (“relevant number,” “certain settings”). Eventually, we need to create a function that maps the relevant features onto dimensions of variability such as these:

- Size of group (three people as in my family, or 5.4 million as in Norway, or 1.4 billion people as in China).
- Nature of group (a city, family, department, corporation, NGO, etc.).
- Kind of members (children, lawyers, medical experts, engineers, or many kinds of people).
- Kind of decision the group makes (laws for fishing tax, when to have a job interview, what to have for dinner, how to distribute goods in a corporation).
- Bindingness and enforcement of those decisions (upheld by social norms, force, violence, social sanctions, financial sanctions, etc.).
- Quantity of decisions: do they make very many decisions or very few (e.g., millions of decisions made by the US government every day, or the very few decisions made by the HKU philosophy department once a month).
- The social, historical, and environmental setting of the group (Athens 2,000 years ago with slaves, in the middle of the Peloponnesian War, or a country like Norway).
- The various input mechanisms: direct vote, voting for representatives, or various forms of deliberation and whatever else is relevantly similar to these.

Put simply, the No-Meaning Hypothesis says that this step, from the initial, simple paradigms to the extremely complex cases, was never made. The totality of factors that determine meanings (whatever these may be) failed to fix KQIE values. Here is what that means more specifically:

- Take a country with 100 million people, in which trillions of important decisions are made every day. **Claim:** There is no fact of the matter about how many, and what kinds of, decisions must be made in “a democratic” way in order for a group to count as “a democracy.”
- Take a complex decision that takes years, involves thousands of people, and has hundreds of stages (think of the decision to build a new airport or hospital). **Claim:** There is no fact about how many of these stages need to classify as “democratic” for the entire process to be democratic.

- Take a simple decision in a small group, for example when the HKU philosophy department should conduct a job interview. **Claim:** There is no fact of the matter about the set of procedures or events that would make the decision count as “democratic.” A vote, in itself, is not necessary nor sufficient. If Bob the dictator says the only two options are 9 a.m. on Wednesday or 2 a.m. on Thursday and then there’s a vote, that wouldn’t make the decision “democratic.”⁵ Voting is not necessary, because when we in the philosophy department actually make those decisions, we typically don’t have a vote—we just talk and come to an agreement. There’s something about voting that is important, but the semantics haven’t settled what it is.
- Consider again a complex group with 100 million people. Even if one has settled on the quantity, quality, and input mechanism, the mechanism also requires the right kind of embedding in laws, institutions, norms, and methods of enforcement in order to count as a “democracy.” That necessity is what the complex quantitative measures of “democracy” bring out. **Claim:** There is no fact of the matter about what the required embedding is.
- At the same time, our interests in the term are in large part focused on the big units—Norway and Canada are paradigms of units that fall into the extension of “democracy,” and they contrast with “North Korea,” which doesn’t fall into that extension. The problem is that the semantics failed to create the bridge from the simple cases to these big, complex cases.

Here is a version of the above argument that builds on a familiar case from the theory of reference. In the paper “The Causal Theory of Names” and book *The Varieties of Reference*, Gareth Evans considers various cases of reference shifts. One of Evans’s many excellent examples involves the term “turkey.” Evans points out that “‘turkey’ was originally applied to the guinea fowl, which was brought to Western Europe via Turkey—the bird we now call ‘turkey’ is native to the New World” (1982: 390, n. 16). So “turkey” started out referring to the guinea fowl. There was then a middle period in

⁵ And if someone lies and tells others that it’s illegal to have interviews on Mondays, that would undermine the vote. If everyone was hypnotized and then they had a vote, it wouldn’t be classified as “democratic,” etc. So you need to add something. Often some vague qualifier like “free and open” is used, but then we need to assume the extension of those words is settled for this case, and the claim is that it isn’t.

which the speakers’ intentions shifted,⁶ and speakers had both turkeys and guinea fowls in mind when they used the term. According to Evans, that period is the meaningless period—the period during which speech involving “turkey” denoted neither turkeys nor guinea fowls. Finally, the practice then stabilized, and information from guinea fowls was eliminated and reference to turkeys established.

The idea is that something similar happened to the D-words. They might have had an initial fixed extension when speakers focused on (and intended to talk about) shared features of certain simple decisions in small collaborative units. Then there was a transition period of unmooring. Speakers now wanted to talk about complex decisions (with many stages over a long period of time), as well as large and varied units, and describe cultures, laws, institutions, norms, etc. as “democratic.” However—and this is an option Evans didn’t consider—the term never got out of the transition period. It got stuck in purgatory, so to speak. Speakers failed to converge on a relevant set of values for KQIE configurations. Imagine, as an analogy, the “turkey” case going a bit differently: “turkey” got unmoored from guinea fowl, but some speakers wanted it to denote sparrows, some wanted it to denote eagles, some owls, some chickens, etc. “Turkey” would then have been unmoored from guinea fowl, but failed to connect to anything new. “Democracy” and “democratic” are like that: they had a clear initial anchoring in simple cases, and then lost their semantic value when there was an effort to expand the extension. To some extent this cries out for an explanation. Why did this happen? The data here is difficult to come by, and the little we have is hard to interpret, but the next four points are meant to contribute to a partial explanation and diagnosis.

Consideration 2: Semantic Distraction—Extensive Exploitation of Lexical Effects

Throughout this book I’ve highlighted the lexical effects of “democracy” and “democratic” (see Chapter 6). Often, speakers who say that something is “democratic,” that a group is “a democracy,” or that an event or institution is “non-democratic” do so in order to exploit the lexical effects of these expressions. For most speakers, these terms will trigger images, memories,

⁶ The way Evans puts it is that the dominant source of information shifted.

associations, and various kinds of emotions. Such lexical effects can be exploited in many ways. Recall again Trump’s claim:

I’m not the one trying to undermine American democracy, I’m the one who’s trying to save it. Please remember that.

Trump, and other speakers like him (including speakers that my readers are likely to have more political sympathies with), will not be using “democracy” for its descriptive content. Trump couldn’t care less about what kind of collective decision-making system is denoted by “democratic,” nor about a particular KQIE configuration. Trump is obviously not alone in being fundamentally indifferent to the idea of a KQIE configuration. Insofar as usage is dominated by descriptively indifferent speakers—that is, speakers who primarily exploit the D-words for the associations, feelings, memories, and mental images they bring out—the speech community will fail to converge on a particular KQIE configuration, and so fail to converge on an extension.

Consideration 3: Normative Disagreements Lead to Semantic Disagreement

Partly because of the laudative lexical effects of the D-words, there is disagreement about what these words *ought* to denote. These disagreements reflect disagreement about how societies *should* be organized. Many speakers want the D-words to denote the kind of decision-making structures that they favor. Take America as an example. Lots of American citizens are devoted to the idea that the way certain decisions (“the political decisions”) are made in America is a paradigm of “a democracy.” If the meanings of the D-words turn out to exclude America from their extensions, that result would be strongly resisted, resented, and objected to. At the same time, lots of Americans disagree about how their society should make collective decisions. So, many Americans share a preference for America being in the extension of the D-words, but they disagree about what that involves. The combined effect is a lack of convergence on a KQIE structure. Disputes about what constitutes good social organization end up being reflected in disagreements about what the D-words ought to mean. That kind of disagreement is not always a bad thing, but if the term in question also lacks a

semantic foundation, the disagreement contributes to a failure to create semantic stability.⁷

These kinds of normative pressures also spring from the mistaken belief that being in the extension of the D-words is an intrinsically good thing—that is, that the D-words have a positive normative quality. They do not,⁸ but as a result of this mistaken belief, normative disagreements end up preventing a descriptive term from establishing its semantic foundation. The speech community is also a deeply divided political community, which hasn’t converged on a way to go from cases of simple decisions in smallish groups to the massively complex cases that speakers mostly care about.

Connected to these confusions is the enormous amount of *ideologically infused hyperbolic fluff* that the D-words are involved in. The D-words are extensively used in ways that are not focused on identifying specific extensions (groups for the noun and decisions for the adjective), but instead on associating the D-words with phenomena such as freedom and equality. Of course, if the D-words had extensions, there could be connections between those and phenomena like freedom and equality. That would be an open empirical question. However, the focus on those connections prior to fixing KQIE values will undermine the required semantic foundation. It’s putting the ideological cart before the semantic horse.

An analogy might help clarify how these various distractions undermine a sound semantic foundation:

‘D-Eat’ is a meaningless term that should have denoted a diet, but ended up meaningless because of lexical effects and ideological fluff: Suppose a company tries to introduce a name for a new diet: ‘D-Eat.’ The company has copyrighted the name, but hasn’t worked out the details of the diet yet. The plan is for it to be very complicated—it includes some salad on Tuesday, some berries on Sunday, pasta sometimes, but the whole thing is supposed to be connected to each person’s overall way of life in very complicated ways that have not yet been worked out. So far, the word doesn’t denote a diet. It’s

⁷ The kind of disagreement I just described is sometimes classified as “essential contestability.” Those who think in those terms tend to also think that this is a mundane phenomenon that shouldn’t be considered a defect. I address this objection in Chapter 12, where I have collected objections. If this kind of view seems pressing to you at this point, it might make sense to read the reply to it now. I argue that the idea of essential contestability is poorly worked out and that to the extent that it is worked out, it fails to explain or ameliorate the data appealed to here.

⁸ See the subsection “The Cost of Ignoring Paradigms, Commonality, and KQIE Structure” in Chapter 6 for why this is a mistake.

a work in progress. Suppose the following two things happened: (i) the company started an immensely successful advertising campaign that generated massive goodwill for ‘D-Eat,’ so that whenever people hear the word, good and positive feelings are generated; (ii) the company also managed to convince people that the D-Eat diet will make people happy, will set you free, and will give you strength and courage. In short, there’s extensive use of ‘D-Eat,’ but none of that use contributes to actually establishing the details of day-to-day food intake for an individual. So the term, despite being widely used with positive lexical effects and an elaborate theoretical superstructure (involving happiness and freedom), ends up as a piece of gibberish that’s nonetheless widely circulated.

This is—at least in part—what has happened to the D-words.

Consideration 4: Disagreement and Lack of Deference to Experts

Some of the D-words’ deficiencies could be ameliorated by the presence of an expert community that the speakers could defer to. A standard view in the literature is that a coordinated expert community can pick up some of the slack when there’s no convergence in the broader speech community. The classic case for this position is presented by Burge, in the paper “Individualism and the Mental.” Burge argues that convergence in the community of medical experts on what the term “arthritis” denotes can determine the denotation even when the non-expert community doesn’t converge. Burge points out that this applies to a broad range of expressions beyond “arthritis” (e.g., “contract,” brisket, and “clavichord”). In other words, the expert community can serve as a stabilizing factor when the overall speech community lacks proper coordination. This, however, **has not** happened in the case of “democracy.” There are at least three reasons for that:

1. There’s no agreement on what counts as an expert in this area. Many believe that the President of the United States of America is an expert on democracy, and so would defer to him. Donald Trump, however, was not and is not an expert on anything, least of all democracy. Nonetheless, more speakers defer to him than to any political scientist or philosopher of democracy. So not only is there no agreement on who the experts are, but lots of people are inherently mistaken about

who the experts are. This contrasts, at least to some extent, with technical terms from, for example, medicine, economics, and physics.

2. If I were to pick the experts on democracy, I would exclude people like Donald Trump and focus on academics. I'd pick experts in political philosophy and political science. However, even if we restrict our attention to this group, we will not find convergence, as we saw in Chapter 6. There's massive disagreement about what the D-words do and should mean.
3. The expert community that I recognize has not been focused on converging on which particular decisions count as democratic and how they add up to a democracy, in the way experts on briskets, contracts, and arthritis have converged on judgments about particular instances. Instead, the community of experts on democracy has focused on two things:
 - a. The parochial features of the political sphere: they have taken a “politics-first” approach (see discussion of Weale in Chapter 6). As a result, their focus has been on features that are distinctive of the political sphere and, even more parochially, on the details of particular contemporary political structures. That has moved the experts' attention away from converging on the semantic foundation in the KQIE structure.
 - b. Ideological superstructure: instead of focusing on identifying the details of the particular mechanisms that count as “democratic,” and the KQIE structure more generally, theorists have focused extensively on the ideological superstructure—alleged connections to freedom and equality, for example.

Consideration 5: No “Natural” Kinds for the Values of KQIE to Gravitate Toward

Some theorists of metasemantics are inspired by David Lewis's view that semantic values gravitate towards naturalness (1983). There are complicated substantive and interpretive questions about what Lewis meant by “naturalness” (Dorr and Hawthorne 2013), but one thing he does is talk about “carving nature at its joints.” For current purposes, I'll assume a somewhat clear pre-theoretic grasp of the idea. The KQIE configuration of the D-words that satisfies commonality and captures paradigms, if there is one, will not

be a natural one—that is, will not carve nature at its joints. The variability in groups, mechanisms, quantity, quality, and embedding are too varied to “cut nature at its joints,” in any sense of that expression. If there is a KQIE configuration that satisfies paradigms and commonality (something I doubt), it will be arbitrary and contrived, and any effort to find it will be a dog’s dinner. That’s not in itself an objection (lots of terms have weird extensions, e.g., “furniture”), but it does mean that there’s no “help from nature.” The D-words aren’t drawn to a particular KQIE configuration. Finding one would take work, and the right kind of coordination within the speech community.

This, however, is not to deny that there might be more or less natural KQIE configurations. One advantage of Christiano’s definition of “democracy” (“some kind of equality at some essential stage of a decision-making process”) is that it is simple and, maybe, somewhat “natural” (or at least not obviously gruesome). That, however, is not to say that the proposed definition is without problems and I discuss these further in Part IV.

Two Alternatives: Context Sensitivity and Liberal Open-Endedness

Two ideas might seem to have been overlooked in the discussion above: (i) that the D-words are context-sensitive; (ii) that the D-words have a kind of open-endedness, meaning that each speaker can shape their meanings to their own liking. I’ll briefly consider these options.

Context Sensitivity

Some terms change what they pick out depending on the context they are uttered in. “Interesting,” for example, is like that: what counts as interesting depends on the context. In the context of a philosophy seminar, a little rock on the floor would not count as interesting. In another context, say for a group of geologists studying little rocks in seminar rooms, that very same rock could be super interesting. So the word “interesting” has managed to have different intensions in different speech contexts. David Kaplan modeled that phenomenon using the notion of an expression’s character: a function from context of speech to intensions (where intensions, again, are functions from points of assessment to extensions). Some terms have stable characters (the same for each context of utterance; that is, they always map

the term to the same extension) and other terms are context-sensitive—their intensions vary between contexts. So, my name “HC” has a stable character, mapping each context to a function from worlds to me. By contrast, “I” is context-sensitive.

Sometimes, when philosophers have a hard time making sense of the stable meaning of an expression, they consider the possibility that the term is context-sensitive, even though it is not obviously so in the way “interesting” is. Inspired by David Lewis, epistemologists have suggested that “knows” is context-sensitive. That view is backed by a pattern of data drawn from ordinary usage: speakers are inclined to lower their standards for knowledge when they are in low-stakes contexts, and then raise them when in high-stakes contexts. That’s the claim made by contextualists. One option worth considering is that “democracy” and “democratic” have variable characters. One way to implement that idea is to think of the D-words as having different KQIE values for different contexts of utterance. I’ve presented the No-Meaning Hypothesis as an argument against the existence of a stable and unique meaning for the D-words. Maybe, instead of looking for a stable meaning, we need to look for a variety of meanings: one for each context of use. The kind, quantity, structure, and embedding can vary between speech contexts. On this view, what counts as democracy for a corporation in 1945 would be different from what counts as democracy for Russia in 1642 and Norway in 2021. The nature of democracy (and a democratic decision) would vary with the size of group, purpose, kind of member, larger social and historical context, etc. Democracy is not one thing, so the requirements for being democratic will vary between contexts.

There might be a *prima facie* plausibility to this kind of view, but in effect it makes the case for No-Meaning stronger. First, note that we still need a stable meaning: the Kaplanian character for “democracy” and “democratic” doesn’t vary. In other words, the function from context to intensions must be stable. So the tricky metasemantic question now is whether it is likely that such a character has been fixed by the relevant kinds of metasemantic processes. All the points I made above (about complexity, interfering lexical effects, lack of experts, lack of natural kinds, and interfering superstructure) count against the hypothesis that we’ve managed to fix on such a function. Additionally, for each group or decision, we would have to embed KQIE values. This is even more demanding. Consider, for example, the HKU philosophy department deciding on a farewell party location. Have the speakers managed to fix a character that determines KQIE values for that group, that context, etc.? It’s not impossible, but it’s unlikely. Moreover, the

usual kind of evidence is not forthcoming. There’s no convergence among ordinary speakers on the kind of function described above, and no effort by experts to converge on one. This contrasts with other cases of context sensitivity: the motivation for a Lewis-style contextualism about “knows” is a stability in ordinary speakers’ use patterns, and their convergence on application conditions relative to context. If those things were absent, the case for the context sensitivity of “knows” would disappear. There’s even less such evidence for “democracy” and “democratic.”

Liberal Open-Endedness

I just argued that it’s implausible that the English language has managed to fix a Kaplanian character for the D-words. This would be even harder than fixing a stable meaning, and so all the considerations in favor of no-meaning still apply to that proposal. Someone could respond: what all this indicates is that the D-terms are genuinely *open-ended*. The reason we can’t find a fixed meaning is because there is no fixed meaning. Instead, there’s a kind of liberal open-endedness. In each context, speakers decide, for themselves or the people around them, what the term means on that particular occasion. No need for the English language to have established a rule in advance. This kind of open-endedness indicates a kind of conceptual freedom for each speaker.

This kind of view wouldn’t be unheard of, and it’s continuous with certain metasemantic views, most prominently the kind of view Peter Ludlow develops in his *Living Words*. However, here I don’t want to assess this kind of view in complete generality (though, I do think it faces serious problems—see my *Fixing Language* [Cappelen 2018: ch. 15]). Instead, I want to focus on ways in which it leads to serious mismatch with how speakers want to use the D-words. It’s a very salient feature of the D-involving discourse that speakers have a clearly non-liberal attitude towards the use of the D-words. Those who think North Korea or Russia is non-democratic don’t just think this status is a matter of individual choice about how to use the word “democracy.” They don’t just think that others are free to use the term in whatever way they want. They don’t see themselves as participating in a linguistic practice that’s analogous to the use of expressions like “delicious.” For “delicious,” there’s a clear sense and understanding that others might use it differently from me. That’s not deeply problematic. We allow massive variability in applications. There are deep and important issues about how to understand the type of speech that “delicious” instantiates (see, e.g., Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009), but it should be clear that “democracy”

plays an entirely different role from “delicious.” If Vladimir Putin says he thinks pickled herring is delicious, we can all go along with that, even if we don’t think pickled herring is delicious. However, if Putin says that Russia is a perfect democracy, there’s a very different reaction. The kind of liberalism that’s extended to “delicious” isn’t similarly extended to “democracy.” Allowing for that kind of liberalism would, again, diverge radically from what speakers have in mind. It would, in effect, be an instance of radical mismatch (for more discussion of mismatch, see below).

Taking Stock of the No-Meaning Hypothesis

The story I just told is meant to make it at least a salient option that the D-words are empty shells—deceptive pieces of terminological fluff exploited by speakers to trigger emotions, much like a brand name. They might be vehicles of bullshit, despite their occurrence in what appears to be deep and serious discourse. However, our theories of meaning are still at a stage where it’s hard to have massive confidence in claims of this sort (just as it’s hard to have massive confidence in claims that the D-words are meaningful), so in what follows I’ll explore an alternative hypothesis according to which the D-words are meaningful, but their meanings are deeply mismatched with speakers’ intentions.

A Less Likely Hypothesis: Radically Mismatched Meaning

I now consider an alternative hypothesis: the D-words are meaningful, but they pick out something that’s radically different from what ordinary speakers want to talk about. Hence we get mismatch. Mismatch is a consideration in favor of abandonment. Here are two ways that could happen:

- Strict and demanding—it’s really hard to be in the extension of “democracy”; very few (or no) groups are correctly classified as “democratic.”
- Liberal and easy—it’s not hard to be in the extension of “democratic.” All it takes is satisfying some minimal conditions.

Either way, there is a fundamental discrepancy between what speakers, on reflection, want to talk about using the D-words and what they actually

talk about. If an expression doesn't pick out what speakers want to talk about using that expression, that's a reason for abandonment and motivation for a shift to a new terminology. This discrepancy is not conclusive, but when combined with communicative failures and Can Do Better, it's a significant consideration.

Meanings That Are Very Demanding

Robert Dahl famously defended a very demanding view of what it takes to be in the extension of "democracy." Dahl says that we should think of "democracy as a state of affairs constituting a *limit*." He goes on to list three characteristics of that limit:

(1) Whenever policy choices are perceived to exist, the alternative selected and enforced as governmental policy is the alternative most preferred by the members. (2) Whenever policy choices are perceived to exist, in the process of choosing the alternative to be enforced as government policy, the preference of each member is assigned an equal value. (3) The Rule: In choosing among alternatives, the alternative preferred by the greater number is selected.

He then goes on to give some conditions that must be satisfied if the Rule is to be enforced:

- a. Every member of the organization performs the acts we assume to constitute an expression of preference among the scheduled alternatives, for example, voting.
- b. In tabulating these expressions (votes), the weight assigned to the choice of each individual is identical.
- c. The alternative with the greatest number of votes is declared the winning choice.
- d. Any member who perceives a set of alternatives, at least one of which he regards as preferable to any of the alternatives presently scheduled, can insert his preferred alternative(s) among those scheduled for voting.
- e. All individuals possess identical information about the alternatives.
- f. Alternatives (leaders or policies) with the greatest number of votes displace any alternatives (leaders or policies) with fewer votes.
- g. The orders of elected officials are executed.

- h.1. Either that all interelection decisions are subordinate or executory to those arrived at during the election stage, that is, elections are in a sense controlling.
- h.2. Or that new decisions during the interelection period are governed by the preceding seven conditions, operating, however, under rather different institutional circumstances.
- h.3. Or both.

Dahl doesn't talk about kind, quantity, structure, and embedding (i.e., KQIE) explicitly, but it's clear that what he is in effect doing is setting the values for those elements at extremely demanding levels. That brings out the key point for current purposes: Dahl makes clear that this ideal never has been, and never will be, realized. He says:

I think it may be laid down dogmatically that no human organization—certainly none with more than a handful of people—has ever met or is ever likely to meet these eight conditions. . . . Because human organizations rarely and perhaps never reach the limit set by these eight conditions, it is necessary to interpret each of the conditions as one end of a continuum or scale along which any given organization might be measured. Unfortunately there is at present no known way of assigning meaningful weights to the eight conditions. However, even without weights, if the eight scales could each be metricized, it would be possible and perhaps useful to establish some arbitrary but not meaningless classes of which the upper chunk might be called “polyarchies.”

(Dahl 2008: 74, *my emphasis*)

The conditions that the D-words pick out are almost impossible to satisfy. Dahl was not interested in metasemantics, and so he didn't tell us how he thought “democracy” ended up with this meaning. It's hard to think of any account that would predict Dahl's empty extension. It doesn't fit use patterns, nor is there any evidence of 1–3 and a–h being salient in speakers' minds or part of their communicative intentions. However, the plausibility of that particular normative view of the metasemantics (and the resulting need to adjudicate between different norms and their interactions with other factors) is not what I want to focus on. I want to focus on the resulting mismatch. Suppose the metasemantic gods told us that Dahl is right: the D-words denote an ideal that no human group instantiates. Here are some

results: that's not what most speakers who use the D-words want to talk about. They want terms that enable them to distinguish between Norway and North Korea, and between Harvard and the HKU philosophy department. There are literally billions of speech acts involving the D-words that have that kind of purpose; that is, where that is the speaker's intention. With the revelation that Dahl was right, these classifications would be pointless (because the D-words denote something that cannot be instantiated).

Dahl recognized this, and helpfully provided us with some new terminology:

Unfortunately there is at present no known way of assigning meaningful weights to the eight conditions. However, even without weights, if the eight scales could each be metricized, it would be possible and perhaps useful to establish some arbitrary but not meaningless classes of which the upper chunk might be called "polyarchies." (73)

Dahl starts giving us some illustrations of how the new terminology can be put to use:

It is perfectly evident, however, that what has just been described is no more than a program, for nothing like it has, I think, ever been attempted. I shall simply set down here, therefore, the following observations. Organizations do in fact diverge markedly in the extent to which they approach the limits set by these eight conditions. Furthermore, "polyarchies" include a variety of organizations which Western political scientists would ordinarily call democratic, including certain aspects of the governments of nation states such as the United States, Great Britain, the Dominions (South Africa possibly excepted), the Scandinavian countries, Mexico, Italy, and France; states and provinces, such as the states of this country and the provinces of Canada; numerous cities and towns; some trade unions; numerous associations such as Parent Teachers' Associations, chapters of the League of Women Voters, and some religious groups; and some primitive societies. **Thus it follows that the number of polyarchies is large.** (The number of egalitarian polyarchies is probably relatively small or perhaps none exist at all.) (Dahl, in Dahl et al. 2003:51; my emphasis)

The D-words would now be reserved for those few speakers who wanted to talk about an unattainable ideal. The familiar kind of classificatory speech of

the form “North Korea is not a democracy” would be replaced by speech of the form “On a metricized version of Dahl’s a–h, North Korea scores n and should not be classified as a polyarchy, because only the upper chunk of the scale indicates polyarchies.” That kind of speech is useful, and I’ll say more about it in Chapter 10. However, the key point in this section is that, even if we put aside the implausibility of the view that the semantics for “democracy” picked out Dahl’s 1–3 and a–h, his view would lead to a massive mismatch, and that mismatch could lead to gradual abandonment (as Dahl acknowledges).

Meanings That Are Very Liberal

The mismatches we just considered made the D-words have very limited extensions. I now turn to an alternative option: extensions that are too liberal. Recall Christiano’s definition of “democracy”:

The term “democracy,” refers very generally to a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision-making.

Two things this definition has going for it are generality and simplicity. It applies broadly to group decision-making and, at least compared to the baroque quantitative definitions we get from the maximalists such as the Economist Intelligence Unit and Polity indexes, it is exceedingly simple. Now ask: How many and what kinds of decisions must be made in a country for that country to be democratic? There are two maximally simple ways to develop Christiano’s suggestions:

- a. Every decision made by the group has to satisfy the equality constraint.
- b. Some decision by the group has to satisfy equality constraints at some point in the process.

Option a would give us another strict constraint and lead to hardly any groups falling into the extension of “a democracy.” Option b, on the other hand, would make it super easy to fall into the extension of “democracy.” Just some little element of equality for some decision at some point and that’s it: the group is a democracy. If this is how the extension of “democracy” is determined, then even North Korea, Tesla, and Harvard count as

“democracies.” Almost every group would count as “democratic.” The result would be massive mismatch, and mismatch is a reason for abandonment. A term that applies to all political structures, clubs, and organizations just isn’t very useful, so it will make sense to turn to more refined terminology.

Taking Stock and Symmetrical Caution

The potential semantic deficiencies I’ve outlined above are:

- The D-words have no context-insensitive meaning.
- The D-words have no context-sensitive meaning.
- The D-words have a meaning that massively undergenerates.
- The D-words have a meaning that massively overgenerates.

If one of these is correct, then there’s a deep mismatch between what users of the D-words want to talk about and the actual meanings of the words. That is a consideration in favor of abandonment. These conclusions, however, are tentative. The lack of conclusiveness here comes from our lack of knowledge about, and understanding of, what meanings are, and how meanings are produced and preserved. There’s a plethora of conflicting theories, and while I have fairly strong views, I don’t want to build my arguments against “democracy” based entirely on those. Conclusions in this domain should be very tentative. Note, however, that the tentativeness goes both ways. That a concept is well entrenched is at best weak evidence in favor of its semantic soundness. It’s no more evidence than the entrenchment of a social practice is evidence in favor of its soundness. Many entrenched social practices are deeply defective and should be abandoned. So it goes for expressions as well: the tentativeness of our assessment goes in both directions. Even if there’s a default pressure in favor of preservation, that is outweighed when, as in this case, we have alternative explanations for a term’s longevity.

Communicative Failures

I turn now to a second category of failure that the D-words are responsible for: communicative failures. These defects are to some extent separable from the semantic failures discussed above. In other words: you can be on

board with these criticisms, even if you have a solution to the semantic problems outlined above. This is not to say that there’s a sharp distinction between semantic failures and communicative failures: if the No-Meaning Hypothesis is correct, that has immediate implications for the communicative effects of the D-words, since semantic values play an important role in determining speakers’ communicative intentions. In the other direction, speakers’ communicative intentions are involved in determining semantic content. However, there’s a way of thinking about “what speakers have in mind” or “what speakers want to talk about” that is somewhat separable from semantic issues. Even if the D-words are meaningless, it might be that speakers have thoughts in their heads when they use the D-words. They won’t be “democracy-thoughts,” but they are thoughts nonetheless. Maybe speakers somehow manage to communicate those thoughts, even if the semantics of the D-words are defective. The next few sections aim to show that even if we focus exclusively on speaker intentions (and put the semantic defects aside), D-words have two categories of communicative defects: they generate verbal disputes (at the level of speaker meaning), and the speaker intentions are often either incoherent or a confused mess of falsehoods.

Verbal Disputes

In Chapters 10 and 11, I’ll be discussing how political theorists talk past one another because they operate with different stipulative definitions of “democracy.” Here, I want to focus instead on verbal disputes between ordinary (non-theoretical) speakers.

Great variability in what speakers have in mind: Ordinary speakers don’t introduce stipulative definitions of “democracy.” They just trust that the language they’ve been handed is meaningful. For now, I want to put aside semantic questions (of what the word semantically picks out), and instead focus on what speakers think they are talking about when they use “democracy.” We can make informed conjectures about that thing. It will be the kind of thing that theorists want to talk about, except that it’ll be messier, less careful, and even more varied. Fortunately, there is also extensive empirical literature on what ordinary citizens think “democracy” picks out.⁹

⁹ For the state-of-the-art work here, see Dalia Research’s Democracy Perception Index for 2020. For recent academic work, see the special issue of the *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende*

These are efforts to determine “what speakers have in mind” or “what they want to talk about” when they use “democracy.”¹⁰ What is clear is that the range of what speakers have in mind is very broad.¹¹ Here are some typical types of responses that are collected using open-ended questions:

- Democracy as the opportunity to vote for different parties.
- Democracy as providing civil and political rights.
- Democracy as providing a life with less poverty and less crime.
- Democracy as a providing social equality.
- Democracy as providing “freedom of expression, freedom of press, freedom, being free, free country.”
- Democracy as providing access to health and education.
- Some speakers use “democracy” to talk about “voice of the people,” “the will of the people,” or “the general will.”
- Some speakers use “democracy” to talk about equality and freedom.
- Some speakers use “democracy” to talk about very specific features of particular political systems.

I could go on, but I’ll refer the reader to the studies just cited that document a very significant divergence in what people think they are talking about when they use “democracy.” Most of the studies have been on the noun, “democracy,” but it’s safe to extrapolate from them that there’s

Politikwissenschaft; its introduction—Osterberg-Kaufmann, Stark, and Mohamad-Klotzbach (2020)—is a helpful overview. For a paper that uses this work to consider the question of abandoning “democracy,” see Kiewiet de Jonge (2016). Baviskar and Malone (2004) presents findings that seem to tend in the same direction.

¹⁰ These studies are undertaken by political scientists, not linguists or philosophers. As a result, the methodology is suboptimal from my point of view. The core problem is that there’s no distinction between what they think the word “democracy” means and all the other beliefs they have about what they call “democracy.” If we ask people on the street to define “kitchen,” they’ll describe the kitchens that they have seen, but that’s not to give the meaning of a word.

¹¹ For example: “Studies of public opinion have found that individuals take the label ‘democracy’ to refer to a wide range of dimensions, not only political but also socio-economic. For example, some individuals do not think of democracy solely in terms of political parties, voting, and civil and political rights (elements corresponding to a ‘minimalist’ definition). They also equate it with a life of less poverty and crime, more equality, and with access to health and education. . . . Surveys conducted in different parts of the world support this view. An open ended question in a 1970s Dutch survey revealed that most people (39 percent of the 890 valid responses) associated democracy with liberty (freedom of expression, freedom of press, freedom, being free, free country), while 9.9 percent mentioned some sort of equality (equality, equal rights and duties)” (Thomassen 1995: 384–5). A similar open-ended question in a cross-national survey of Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico elicited responses that could be grouped into as many as six broad categories: respect/legality, welfare/progress, type of government, voting/elections, equality, and liberty (Seligson 2001: 94).

variability in what people think they are saying when they use “democratic” as well. By extension there’s also massive variability in what speakers think they are saying when they use complex expressions such as “representative democracy,” “democratic institution,” “democratic norms,” etc.

An immediate corollary of this variance is that there’s great potential for verbal disputes among ordinary citizens, politicians, and other decision makers.¹² For example, those who think that “democracy” denotes only *the opportunity to vote once in a while for some people who make some decisions*, and not something that *provides freedom, equality, and good health*, will talk past those who think that it does denote something with those latter features. Their conversations will be largely a waste of time. Their apparent agreements or disagreements will be fake. The implications for policy decisions (insofar as these aim to implement citizens’ preferences) are potentially enormous: there’s the appearance of convergence in preference, when in reality there is none. It’s extraordinarily hard, if not impossible, to discern what citizens’ preferences are, because those preferences are expressed using words that, as we have seen, have no stable contents.

Some will think: *All this may well be true, but it’s unavoidable, and we’ll just have to live with it. Somehow, it has worked well so far, and there are verbal disputes everywhere, so it’s no big deal.* While it is true that some verbal disputes are worth ignoring, this isn’t one of those cases. The thoughts and preferences expressed using the D-words are important. They are important because they play a central role in communal decision-making. Most citizens of what are called “Western liberal democracies” think that what they call “democracy” is the supreme form of governance, they want to live in what they call “democracies,” and they oppose decisions that undermine what they call “democracy.” These preferences shape policies, so it matters what people think “democracy” picks out. If they mean a hundred different things by it, then we can’t summarize their beliefs by saying, “They all believe that democracy is a good thing,” or, “They oppose policies that undermine democracy.” We can’t do that because there’s no one meaning for “democracy” that would cover what they all believe or prefer.¹³

If this point seems too abstract, here are a couple of real-life illustrations of what I have in mind. Consider first these competing claims, one from

¹² Again, I use the broad sense of verbal dispute found in Chalmers, with the modifications from Chapter 2.

¹³ A possible reply here appeals to what I in earlier work call “topic continuity,” where we are, in some sense, talking about “the same thing,” even if we have different things in mind (or use different semantic contents). For a discussion of that option, see Chapter 12.

Washington Post journalist Jennifer Rubin, and the by now familiar quote from Trump about being the defender of what he calls “democracy”:¹⁴

The Truth About GOP: They Prefer Authoritarianism to Democracy: . . . a large percentage of Republicans — that is, tens of millions of Americans — embrace an authoritarianism defined “as the desire to submit to some authority, aggression that is directed against whomever the authority says should be targeted and a desire to have everybody follow the norms and social conventions that the authority says should be followed.” This inclination to follow a demagogue and to reject democratic values is more pronounced than in other Western democracies.¹⁵

I’m not the one trying to undermine American democracy . . . I’m the one who’s trying to save it. Please remember that.

We’re tempted to say that there’s something Rubin and Trump disagree over: *whether the Republicans try to undermine democracy*. Trump says he and his fellow Republicans are supporting democracy, while Rubin and the *Washington Post* say they aren’t. For that to be a genuine disagreement, they need to converge on what they are talking about when they use “democracy.” One way for that to happen is for the English expression to have a fixed meaning independent of what speakers think it means. That was the option criticized above. In this section, I have shifted attention to what speakers want to talk about (their intended understanding of “democracy”). For there to be convergence of content so understood, we need speakers’ intentions for and understandings of “democracy” and “democratic” to converge. We have, of course, not done experiments on Rubin and Trump specifically, but it’s a safe bet that there will be no convergence. It is unlikely, for example, that Rubin has in mind the same KQEI structure as Trump, or that either of them even has one in mind at all. It’s also unlikely that they converge on a version of the Economist Intelligence Unit’s sixty dimensions of democracy, or on some version of minimalism.

If we have no confidence that there is such convergence, then we should have no confidence that they disagree. When one says, “Republicans undermine democracy,” and the other says, “Republicans defend democracy,”

¹⁴ I’m treating Rubin and Trump as “ordinary speakers” for our purposes—it’s a stretch, but their special statuses, as journalist and ex-president respectively, don’t matter (all that much) for current purposes.

¹⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/29/truth-about-gop-they-prefer-authoritarianism-democracy/>.

their understandings of “democracy” differ to such an extent that they talk past one another. That they are talking past one another is important, because the appeal to what they call “democracy” justifies and motivates important policy actions. In Trump’s case, it’s the alleged reason why he, and millions of other Americans, refuse to accept Joe Biden as the legitimate president of the US. For Rubin, it is a reason for resisting the efforts to remove Biden as president.

There’s a cynical understanding of what’s going on here, which goes something along the following lines:

Cynical reaction: We all know that political speech is filled with rhetoric and bullshit. It’s all basically just a play for power and words are used only for that purpose. Why is that a big surprise?

At the end of the day, this book is a defense of a specific version of the cynical reaction, but I think that the kinds of broad generalizations expressed by the cynical reaction are in danger of being as much rhetorical bullshit as the speech they criticize. As articulated, this kind of view is too simplistic, and for it to have teeth one needs to show the point in detail, for specific expressions and exchanges. The particular case we are investigating here is telling, because Rubin is a serious journalist, who is not directly engaged in a power play. Rubin has no relevant political power to win. So there’s an asymmetry here: even if we are sympathetic to the cynical reaction, we should expect Rubin, and other serious citizens who are not trying to win power, to make an effort to engage in a genuine debate. On my view, even the most sophisticated of citizens (such as Rubin) fail to do so. They fail not because they are ignorant, uninterested, or biased (in the way Brennan’s hooligans are), but because the linguistic devices they have at their disposal fail.

In sum: when we turn our attention to what speakers have in mind—what they want to talk about—we encounter divergences that lead to verbal disputes, which have important consequences.

Taking Stock of the Arguments against “Democracy”

This completes the negative arguments against the D-words. These are arguments that support abandonment. They show that D-users engage in a practice that undermines thinking, talking, and communication. More specifically:

- If the No-Meaning Hypothesis is right, D-users say nothing. They utter sentences that mean nothing. They have the illusion of saying something, but they don't. They think they express thoughts, but they don't. What has the appearance of being deep discourse about important and valuable topics is revealed to be a form of dressed-up nonsense.
- If one of the mismatch hypotheses is correct, then ordinary classifications that speakers take for granted are mistaken, and what they are actually talking about when they use the D-words is radically different from what they want to talk about. Again, a consequence is that citizens and theorists are fundamentally mistaken in their efforts to classify, advocate for, and plan our collective decision-making procedures.
- Even putting all that aside, D-users are most likely engaged in an enormous amount of complex, time-consuming, and ultimately pointless verbal disputes.
- Finally, ordinary speakers' assumptions about what the D-words pick out are often false and incoherent.

In response, you can say: *It's easy to criticize a linguistic practice that great thinkers, politicians, and citizens have spent centuries building up, but I won't be moved (and I won't abandon) unless you show me how to do better.* That's exactly the challenge I take on in the next two chapters (and after you've read those chapters, the conclusions here will seem less provocative, but just a tad).

8

Better Than “Democracy”

A Chapter of Good Cheer

This is a chapter of good cheer. We put behind us talk of verbal defects and focus instead on how easy it is to do better. Speakers that use the D-words—be they theorists or ordinary citizens—could easily use other terminology. What they want to say when using those words, they can say using other terminology. We know pretty much what they want to talk about because they tell us. The theorists I discuss in Chapter 10 give us their definitions, and there are plenty of studies that tell us what ordinary citizens think the words mean (or what they want them to mean). It takes minimal effort to find all these alternative ways of speaking. In what follows I’ll describe some of these alternatives, but the aim is not exhaustiveness. Think of this chapter as a challenge:

The challenge: Is there anything you want to say using ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic’ that you can’t say better using other terminology?

What I do in this chapter will seem familiar to those who are familiar with David Chalmers’s *method of elimination*, a procedure he proposes in order to reveal and eliminate verbal disputes. Chalmers says:

To apply this method to a dispute over a sentence *S* that is potentially verbal with respect to term *T*, one proceeds as follows. First: one bars the use (and the mention) of term *T*. Second: one tries to find a sentence *S'* in the newly restricted vocabulary such that the parties disagree nonverbally over *S'* and such that the disagreement over *S'* is part of the dispute over *S*. Third: If there is such an *S'*, the dispute over *S* is not wholly verbal, or at least there is a substantive dispute in the vicinity. Fourth: If there is no such *S'* then the dispute over *S* is wholly verbal (except in the special case of vocabulary exhaustion, discussed below).

Chalmers has two initial illustrations of the method as applied to “murderer” and “planet”:

For example: to adjudicate whether a dispute over whether O.J. Simpson is a murderer is verbal with respect to ‘murderer,’ one may bar the use of the term. In this case, it is likely that there will be various sentences *S*’ such that nonverbal dispute over *S*’ is part of the original dispute: for example, did Simpson slash his wife’s neck with a knife? If so, the original dispute is not wholly verbal. In the case of ‘Pluto is a planet,’ one may bar the use of ‘planet,’ Here it may be hard to find any nonverbal dispute not involving the term ‘planet’ that is part of the original dispute. If there is no such dispute, then the dispute is verbal.

You can think of this chapter as the method of elimination applied to the D-words, but the method isn’t used only to test for verbal disputes (although it is used for that as well) but also to reveal the availability of alternative terminology. Of course, there’s always the question of whether the alternative terminology is itself defective (just as there’s a question of whether there are genuine verbal disputes about the restricted vocabulary). That just shows we have a lot of work to do, not that we shouldn’t get started.

Can Do Better: The Argument from Alternative Vocabulary

Let’s start with how to talk about collective decision-making of relatively small groups in simple settings. Here are some of the issues to think about:

- Should those who are more knowledgeable have more influence on decision-making than those who are ignorant?
- How can we make sure there’s an appropriate kind of equality among the group members at some essential stage of the decision-making process?
- Should the preferences of those who care a lot matter more than the preferences of those who don’t really care?
- What is the best way to aggregate group preferences?
- What are the implications of Arrow’s Theorem for the ranking of group preferences?
- How should voting take place, and what is voting?

- Can deliberation and consultation replace voting?
- Can sortition be better than voting (and what’s the relevant sense(s) of “better”)?

Many of the most interesting questions about collective decisions are process-oriented: who gets to give input, and how is that input taken into account in the decision? How are group members’ preferences taken into account? Some questions, however, are output-oriented: does one way of making decisions produce better decisions than another, and if so, what’s the standard for being better?

Discussions of all these issues can profit from a distinction between normative and descriptive questions. Descriptive questions concern various aspects of how a decision is made, and the results of that decision mechanism. The normative questions then ask whether that mechanism and its outcomes are good, just, fair, or have some other relevant normative property.

At a more abstract level, it can be useful to think of collective decision-making mechanisms as having four elements: (i) a group, *G*, of people; (ii) a domain, *D*, of choices that *G*’s members have to make collectively; (iii) a way, *W*, of making decisions between options in domain *D*; and (iv) a method, *M*, for *G*’s members and others to provide input to *W*. In short:

There’s a group *G*, that makes decisions in domain *D*, in way *W*, and *G*-members (and others) give input through mechanism *M*.

For simplicity, we can focus on these four elements—*G*, *D*, *W*, and *M*:

- The group could be any kind of group—a club, some friends, or a family. Larger and more complex groups could be corporations or organizations such as Harvard, or Tesla, or *The New York Times*. The very big units would be nation-states.
- The decision domain could be a tenure decision at Harvard, or a decision about the price of a new Tesla, or decisions about what goes on the front page of *The New York Times*.
- The way in which decisions are made varies massively. In the case of tenure decisions at Harvard, it is relatively simple: “The President makes the final decision regarding all tenure appointments.”¹

¹ https://facultyresources.fas.harvard.edu/files/facultyresources/files/final_2018_2019_tenure_track_hbk_for_website.pdf.

The decision-making process at *The New York Times* is opaque, but formally speaking the Executive Editor will make final decisions.

- Finally, many people will, in various ways, provide feedback and input along the way. Harvard tenure decisions illustrate this: “To help in making this decision, the President or Provost often presides over an ad hoc committee that reviews your case for promotion. External ad hoc committee members and departmental ‘witnesses’ are relied on for their expertise in the field.”

Again, if we have a description of a particular G, D, W, and M, we can ask normative questions: is that W and M pairing good for Harvard’s tenure decisions? Should the decision be voted on by, for example, the entire faculty? Should the department and the experts in the field that department studies have the final say? Why should the president decide on the tenure-worthiness of a philosophy professor if the president knows nothing about philosophy? Should Elon Musk have veto power at Tesla? We can also ask detailed questions about the effects of these various mechanisms: what are the consequences of Harvard’s decision-making mechanism? What effects has it had on the quality of faculty at Harvard, the teaching quality, and the nature of the work being done at the institution?

In the simplified formula above I left out an important variable:

- **The historical, cultural, and socioeconomic setting of the G, D, W, and M.** We might want to consider the same GDWM combination relative to different such settings. A decision-making mechanism could work well in one historical, cultural, and socioeconomic setting, but not in another. There is, however, a problem with that way of proceeding: it assumes that decision-making mechanisms can be characterized independently of their context, but, arguably, they cannot. The way in which G, D, and W are characterized will be intrinsically connected to broad features of C. The idea that, for example, we can have the same GD in Scotland in 1434 as in India in 2020 is implausible.

Let’s get back to “democracy” and “democratic.” What I’ve done is illustrate how easy it is to find ways of talking that eliminate the D-words, but preserve a great deal of what D-users want to talk about. Recall the challenge: “Is there anything you want to say using ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic’ that you can’t say better using other terminology?” My conjecture is that there’s nothing D-users want to talk about that isn’t covered by the list above

(when properly expanded—it’s not meant to be exhaustive). As we have seen, many D-users want to talk specifically about political structures. So far, I haven’t said much about those. But again, it’s not hard to find alternative ways to talk. Some excellent sources of such ways of speaking are the various quantitative measures that have been proposed by those who construct particular “democracy indices.” These all provide good linguistic resources for the D-abolitionist. In Chapter 10 I discuss Coppedge et al. (2011), who use points such as the following to quantify what they call “democracy”:

1. Sovereignty—the degree to which a polity is able to govern itself in its domestic and foreign policies, free from interference from other polities (aside from treaty agreements and regular international-system constraints).
2. Authority—the degree to which central governmental authority is preeminent throughout the territory claimed as part of the polity. (If the government has no authority outside the capital, then the rest of the territory is not governed by whatever rules that polity has established.)
3. Elective government—the extent to which executive functions are handled by officials chosen by election.
4. Male suffrage—the extent to which adult males have the right to vote in elections.
5. Female suffrage—the extent to which adult females have the right to vote in elections.
6. Turnout—the level of participation in elections and other officially sponsored consultations.
7. Regular elections—the extent to which elections are held regularly and on schedule, according to the constitution.
8. Free elections—the extent to which parties and candidates can gain access to the ballot, compete for votes in an environment free of government interference, and have their votes counted and allocated fairly. Also, the extent to which citizens are able to register to vote.
9. Access to media and campaign finance—the extent to which all parties/candidates are granted equal access to the media and to campaign finance, proportional to their support in the electorate.
10. Executive rule of law—the extent to which the executive (and persons and agencies under his/her control) follows the law, as defined by the constitution, treaties, statutes, and as interpreted by the judiciary.

11. Executive constraints—the extent of effective constraints on the executive (whether by elective or non-elective bodies).
12. Legislative power—the extent to which the legislature controls the executive—with parliamentary systems understood as defining one end of the continuum and systems dominated by a separately selected executive unaccountable to the legislature, or systems in which the legislature is entirely absent, defining the other end.
13. Judicial independence—the extent to which the highest judicial bodies are independent of the executive and other outside influences.
14. Judicial review—the extent to which the highest judicial bodies are able to review acts of legislation and other governmental actions in the light of constitutional provisions, and the extent to which such decisions are respected by other bodies.
15. Party strength—the extent to which parties are institutionalized (rather than simply the vehicle for specific candidates) and centralized (in organizational structure, electoral behavior, and legislative behavior).
16. Party ideology—the extent to which parties have well-defined, consistent, and coherent ideologies.
17. Party system size—the number of parties gaining seats in the national legislature and party system fractionalization (weighting parties by their relative size).
18. Electoral system proportionality—the absence of barriers to representation for small parties, as a product of district magnitude, thresholds, or other statutory restrictions.
19. Competitiveness—the closeness of the vote between the two highest vote-getters in a national election.
20. Turnover—the change in (a) party control and (b) individual control over (c) the executive and—if different—(d) the most powerful office in the land.
21. Media development—the extent to which major media outlets are independent, free to air diverse political views, and able to reach the citizenry.
22. Civil society independence—the extent to which civil society (excluding parties and media) is independent of the state and able to voice opinions critical of political leaders.
23. Civil society political engagement—the extent to which civil society (excluding parties and media) is engaged in politics, both electoral and consultative.

24. Subnational government elections—the extent to which there are subnational governments elected through free and fair elections.
26. Direct democracy—the extent to which opportunities exist for citizens to engage directly in policy-making (e.g., through referenda).
27. Civil liberty—the extent to which citizens enjoy freedom of speech and freedom from politically motivated persecution by the government.
28. Property rights—the extent to which property rights are protected.
29. Religious freedom—the extent to which freedom of religion is guaranteed.
30. Equal resources—the extent to which resources such as income, education, and health (which may impact ability to participate in politics) are widely and equally available.
31. Gender equality—the extent to which women achieve equal representation in the legislature and other high positions within government.
32. Ethnic equality—the extent to which underprivileged ethnic groups (defined by race, religion, caste, or other ascriptive characteristics) are granted formal rights to suffrage and to positions of power within the government, as well as the extent to which such groups actually vote and gain representation in the legislature and other high positions within the government.
33. Inclusive citizenship—the degree to which all citizens and permanent residents enjoy the protections of the law.

You can talk about each of these items, and the connections between them. If you need more inspiration for how to talk in a D-free way, take a look at the list from the Economist Intelligence Unit, or Freedom House. Whichever one you choose, it will give you plenty of things to talk about that are not randomly related to what D-users want to talk about. Instead, those things are what the thoughtful creators of those lists think D-users want to talk about. The only bizarre and objectionable feature of those lists is that the authors insist on adding all the items up to what they call “democracy” (more on the bizarreness of this in Chapter 10). Instead, they should talk about the things in the list, why particular features are on the list, why those features are important, how they do or don’t contribute to well-being, how the various dimensions can be measured, and how they are interrelated. Nothing other than confusion and obscurity are added by using the D-word to summarize these conversations.

Some readers will be concerned that my talk about “what speakers want to talk about” leaves out the most important thing that users of the D-words want to talk about: *democracy*. If someone utters the sentence “Democracy is a wonderful form of governance,” it’s likely that one answer to the question “What does she want to talk about?” is “Democracy.” When the speaker is asked, “OK, but when you use ‘democracy,’ what do you want that expression to pick out?” she might just answer, “I just expect it to do its job: to denote democracy.” Maybe your interlocutor just keeps going in circles and reusing “democracy” or “democratic” to describe what she wants to talk about. You can then ask her questions along the following line: “If you think what ‘democracy’ picks out is wonderful, can you tell us what its wonderful features are?” Maybe then she’ll say things like, “It guarantees freedom, equality, good health, and happiness for all,” and then we have some evidence that she wants to talk about a form of collective decision-making that has those results. Of course, it’s possible that her answers still just reuse “democracy” or “democratic.” She might say: “Because in democracy there are wonderful democratic decisions and wonderful democratic norms and wonderful democratic institutions,” etc. If there are such diehard “democracy” users, it won’t be easy for an abolitionist to capture what they want to talk about using non-D-words. These, however, are weird and unusual speakers. Most speakers use a term such as “democracy” because they think that it picks out certain features, and they can give us a sense of what those features are. The speakers who refuse to give a “democracy”-neutral description of what they want to talk about when they use the D-words might still be encouraged to talk about all the issues I’ve mentioned above, and they can feel free to expand on them in a D-neutral way. Admittedly, they might mope about complying, and say something like “It’s unfair that I just get to talk about all these issues, but not about democracy.”

I could go on and on, but I hope that readers will get the idea: replacement terminology is easy to come by. It is well documented what D-users (theorists and non-theorists alike) want to talk about when they indulge in D-talk. Of course, some of the replacement vocabulary will take time to develop. It’s not something that’s fixed in speakers’ minds right now. Using it well will require creativity. There is also no *guarantee* that, were we to abandon “democracy” and “democratic,” speakers wouldn’t end up in just as bad a place (more on that below). But nothing ventured, nothing gained.

9

Consequences of Abandoning “Democracy”

This is where we are: D-talk is semantically and communicatively defective. These defects are not just linguistic peculiarities—they also have serious non-linguistic consequences. At the same time, there are excellent alternatives to D-talk. In sum: D-talk is both defective and unnecessary. Below are some illustrations of how it's possible to take familiar D-focused debates and improve them in D-purged terminology.

Case Study: Epistocracy—Hooligans vs. Vulcans

At its most abstract level, the debate over epistocracy is a debate about the roles of knowledge and understanding¹ in collective decision-making. In particular, the focus has been on the roles of knowledge and understanding for certain kinds of decisions made by nations. Brennan defines epistocracy as follows: “Epistocracy means the rule of the knowledgeable. More precisely, a regime is epistocratic to the extent that political power is formally distributed according to competence, skill, and the good faith to act on that skill” (Brennan 2016: 14). Some people think that political power should be so distributed, and others deny that. Those who support this kind of view need to explain how it should be implemented: weighted votes, tests as a requirement for voting, epistocratic veto, or some other form. One of the central objections to investing power in the epistocrats is that the relevant kinds of skills are unevenly distributed across populations, so epistocracy can lead to certain forms of unfairness. Those who oppose epistocracy need to explain why people who are ignorant, indifferent, and irrationally biased should participate on an equal footing with those who are not. And so it

¹ And maybe virtue (see Brennan 2016: ch. 3), but I'll put that aside for now since it won't affect the key points made here.

goes. Important to note: *none of this needs to be presented as a debate over ‘democracy.’* Those in favor of giving knowledgeable citizens some extra umph in collective decision-making don’t need to present their view as being ‘anti-democratic.’ Not only is it unnecessary, but it introduces a set of pointless issues such as: what exactly does ‘democracy’ pick out, and why is what it picks out incompatible with giving extra power to those who know a lot? Not only is it pointless, but it also plays into the expressive and emotive side of political discourse, in which the D-word is used in large part to exploit its lexical effects. Brennan’s book *Against Democracy* is a good example of using the D-word to trigger an affective response. Lots of potential readers have positive feelings, associations, and memories associated with the D-word. By putting “against” in front of that word in his title, Brennan achieves an immediate reaction from potential readers—it’s like saying he’s against puppies. If the goal is just to get that attention, then goal achieved. If, however, the arguments in this book are correct, that framing undermines the overall intellectual value of the work. The core ideas in that book are not only articulable without the D-words; they are, in the book, actually articulated without the D-words.

Case Study: Restrictions on Voting and Gerrymandering

Here’s another example of how a conversation can be improved if it’s purged of D-talk. As I’m writing this, there’s massive concern in America about the gradual undermining of the Voting Rights Act. A current trigger is the Texas GOP’s Voting Bill, which would empower poll watchers, restrict mail-in voting, ban 24-hour voting locations, and various other things that many in the Democratic Party perceive as aimed to limit voter turnout.² The Republicans have a majority in the Texas State Senate, but need a quorum. To prevent a quorum, the Democratic members of the Texas legislature all left Texas³ in order to block the legislation from going forward.

The Texas GOP Voting Bill is often presented as an existential threat to democracy. Here is an illustration from *The New York Times*:⁴

² <https://apnews.com/article/health-government-and-politics-texas-voting-coronavirus-pandemic-9bc36a6e8c967757340ab25f49b8ddbf>.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/13/us/texas-democrats-leave.html>.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/12/us/republicans-voting-rights-democrats.html>.

Democratic senators have been unable to move voting and election bills that would address what many of them call a **fundamental attack on American democracy** that could lock in a new era of Republican minority rule.

“There’s not a caucus meeting that goes by that our leadership doesn’t talk about S. 1 and **how our democracy is on the verge of disappearing**,” U.S. Representative John Yarmuth, a Kentucky Democrat who has spent 14 years in the House, said in an interview, using shorthand for voting legislation stalled in the Senate. “There’s plenty to be scared about.”

Republicans argue that it’s **Democrats who are the threat to democracy**. “The Democratic Party wants to rewrite the ground rules of American politics for partisan benefit,” Senator Mitch McConnell, the minority leader, said at a hearing on the bill to overhaul voting laws, called the For the People Act. (my emphasis)

We could play the D-game:

The D-game: does ‘D’ denote something that’s incompatible with restrictions on mail-in voting? Does it denote something that requires 24-hour voting locations? Those engaged in that debate could then try to do some metasemantics to settle it. If the word lacks a meaning, then these questions have no answers. If it picks out, say, a Schumpeter-style, minimalistic form of decision-making, we get one answer. If it picks out, say, something based on the thirty-six dimensions of the Economist Intelligence Unit, then maybe a democracy of a certain degree has mail-in voting, and a democracy of a slightly different degree doesn’t.

This game, however, is pointless. The interesting question has two dimensions. First, a descriptive one about the consequences of putting certain restrictions on, for example, mail-in voting and the hours of voting booths. Second, we assess those consequences. We assess the consequences in the way we assess other social practices. We ask, for example, whether such restrictions would negatively affect citizens’ ability to participate in elections. Both the descriptive and the normative dimensions of this question are hard. They are not, however, made any easier by playing the D-game. The only reason these debates get mixed up with the D-game is that participants want to exploit the D-word for its lexical effects. They want to give the impression that they are fighting for whatever warm and fuzzy effects that expression triggers. It has no intellectual value and can easily be given up.

Case Study: Viktor Orbán and Political Developments in Hungary

It's not just gerrymandering and voting restrictions that are described as "anti-democratic." Larger political developments are also frequently characterized in those terms. I'll use recent political developments in Hungary as an example. Viktor Orbán's government is often criticized for being "anti-democratic." If I'm right, that's not a good way to object to Orbán's policies. I hope that it is obvious that arguing this point is not in any way defending his policies. Rather, I am making a claim about how criticism should be presented. Again, the debate nicely illustrates my points about how easy it is to do better. I'll use as my example two representative articles about the current political situation in Hungary. The first is from *The Atlantic* and has the catchy headline "EU Watches as Hungary Kills Democracy." The lexical effects of that are powerful (comparable to being told that Hungary kills and eats puppies), but, if I'm right, the headline is empty rhetoric. However, consider how it continues:

Orbán has overseen the steady dismantling of the country's democratic institutions, eroding its press freedoms, undermining its education system, and limiting the power of its judiciary.... Under the new emergency legislation, his far-right Fidesz party can effectively govern unchallenged, bypassing both Parliament and existing laws. It also permits the government to hand out jail terms for those deemed to be spreading misinformation. Though other countries have imposed their own emergency measures to combat the crisis, Hungary's are among the most far reaching—and the most permanent. Though the Hungarian government insists that these measures will last only as long as the crisis does, the duration is entirely up to Orbán. After all, the emergency powers can be lifted only with the support of two-thirds of Parliament (a majority that Orbán holds).⁵

Note how easy it is to purge this criticism of the emotionally loaded D-words. The author claims that Orbán has (i) introduced unreasonable restrictions on press freedom, (ii) undermined aspects of the education system,

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/europe-hungary-viktor-orban-coronavirus-covid19-democracy/609313/>.

(iii) limited the power of the judiciary in various ways, and (iv) introduced new emergency powers.

Those claims are easy to present without the D-words. What the journalist needs to do is back them up with evidence. Again, that would all be informative, and need not involve the D-words. Nothing is gained by focusing on questions such as “Is restricting the power of the judiciary really incompatible with what ‘democracy’ picks out?” Not only is nothing gained, but suppose it turns out that “democracy” does have a meaning, but the meaning isn’t one that excludes the kind of restrictions in question. Then the answer is “No, it isn’t incompatible with democracy (when the meaning of that term is properly grasped).” Does that make the restrictions less objectionable? It’s clear from the context that the negative assessment of these restrictions is not dependent on the answers to obscure semantic questions.

This discussion brings out another negative effect of using the D-words: they leave normative judgments implicit and opaque. The D-words are normatively neutral (see Chapter 6, “Expressive and Normative Dimensions”), but they are often confused with terms of assessment. Speakers tend to think that calling something “anti-democratic” is itself a negative assessment. However, it is only a negative assessment if we presuppose a background of shared normative assumptions of the form “Democracy denotes structures of kind K, and structures of that kind are good because of G,” where “G” spells out the normative assessments of the K structures. Leaving both K and G implicit is communicatively and cognitively unfortunate. We can do better: we can make the G- and K-components explicit. Abandoning the D-words will encourage that: you now have to say why such-and-such restrictions on, say, the power of the judiciary are bad. Make the relevant norms explicit and then relate them to the facts. That is much better than leaving them obscurely hidden in your use of empty rhetoric.

Since these points are important, I’ll give another illustration (from *Vox*, in 2018), again involving Hungary and Orbán. This is another article with a headline that’s the linguistic equivalent of a picture of dying puppies: “It happened there: how democracy died in Hungary.” The article, however, has plenty of criticisms that are articulated without reliance on the D-words. The author says:

Elections there are free, in the sense that the vote counts aren’t nakedly rigged. But they are unfair: The government controls the airwaves and media companies to such a degree that the opposition can’t get a fair hearing. Orbán’s party, Fidesz, **stands up bogus opposition parties** during

parliamentary elections as a means of dividing the anti-Fidesz vote. In April 2018, Fidesz won the national elections, cementing Orbán's hold on power.⁶

These are the kinds of points that the author should be focused on, and he doesn't need the D-words to make them. Nothing is gained here by discussing the extent to which "the opposition getting a fair hearing" is a necessary condition for being in the extension of "democratic." There's a debate to be had about the extent to which societies should give competing views equal airtime (and what that means). We can describe the ways in which that can be achieved, and the consequences of not doing it, and then we can engage in explicit assessment. That assessment shouldn't be sneakily hidden by using terms like "anti-democratic" and its cognates.

I hope that it is obvious to readers that abandoning the D-word is a politically neutral act. It's not a defense of any particular policies, for example, restrictions on the judiciary, education reform, opening hours for voting booths, rules that govern speech, etc. It is, however, a criticism of the way a lot of those who classify themselves as "pro-democracy" talk about these issues: the cognitive and argumentative shortcuts they take using the D-words are cognitively and communicatively disgraceful. Those shortcuts are confused, lazy, and counterproductive. The pattern we'll find repeated goes something like this:

- Authors exploit D-words for lexical effects.
- They assume that their audience will share their own assumptions about what, if any, kinds of political structures are correctly classified as "democratic."
- They will use the D-words to try to communicate normative assessments, but leave those assessments, and the principles behind them, unarticulated.

Fortunately, as I've shown in this chapter, it's easy to do better, and most of these authors know how to do so. There is, of course, the question of how abolitionists should relate to those who, despite warnings, insist on using the D-words. That's the topic of the next section.

⁶ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump>.

Case Study: Joe Biden on “the Battle for Democracy”

During President Biden’s first press conference, he said:

It is clear, absolutely clear . . . this is a battle between the utility of democracies in the 21st century and autocracies . . . That’s what’s at stake here. We’ve got to prove democracy works.⁷

Abolitionists say that no clear thought is expressed by these sentences, and that it’s a failed effort to communicate. That’s not to say that there isn’t disagreement among political leaders about how to make collective decisions, nor that these debates aren’t important. For Biden to succeed in saying something meaningful, he would have to say something more complex. He could, for example, try to articulate how there are important disagreements about:

- *the value of and nature of elections, the role of elected representatives in collective decision-making, the kinds of decisions that these representatives make and the way they make them, how those decisions are implemented, the interconnections between elected representatives and the legislature, the value and nature of certain types of public discourse, the ways in which political decisions take into account the preferences of citizens, the value of individuals vs. the wellbeing of the collective as a whole, the value of an outcome vs. the process that achieves that outcome, etc. (this “etc.” will no doubt be exceedingly complex).*

It should be obvious that there are some problems with speaking in the way I just sketched: the resulting speech would be complicated and boring. It wouldn’t be good rhetoric. What Biden would end up saying would require a patient audience who is willing to listen, and to make an effort to understand and think. Biden, being a politician, assumes he doesn’t have that kind of audience. His goal is to speak to voters who are, for the most part, what Brennan calls intellectual hooligans: they are ignorant, inattentive, biased, and have no incentive to think carefully or even pay attention. Biden, knowing this, therefore chooses to speak in empty slogans. These slogans can, as we have seen, have lexical effects that suit his purpose. He can, for example, exploit the Shibboleth Effect (see Chapter 3) of

⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/25/politics/biden-autocracies-versus-democracies/index.html>.

“democracy.” Despite being empty of meaning, the use of the term can signal membership of a group and have other positive (from Biden’s point of view) lexical effects. Putting all this together, it amounts to a response along the following lines: *This is simply what political discourse is like. Any suggestion that it can be improved is unrealistic, and completely fails to take into account the nature of politics.*

That response, however, manages to both miss the point and be false:

- It misses the point because I’m not saying that this kind of speaking is easy to implement. I haven’t talked about implementation yet. The following two thoughts are compatible:
 - (a) It is exceedingly hard for Biden (and others) to do better; (b) Biden (and others) should do better.

There are lots of things people should do that are very hard to do.

- However, it’s false to say that it is *impossibly hard* to do better. I just wrote up a few sentences above (the italicized bullet point) that provide a starting point for how to do better. Biden has been around politics long enough to be able to do this. It’s not really that hard to talk about various ways voting can take place, various ways to take into account the preferences of citizens, etc. All it takes is a willingness to work toward reducing bullshit in politics.

How Should D-Abolitionists Relate to D-Users?

In Chapter 2 I talked generally about how abolitionists should relate to preservationists. Here, I’ll apply some of those general lessons to the specific case of D-word abolitionists talking to D-word preservationists. The basic strategy is the one I’ve already illustrated above when discussing voting restrictions and gerrymandering. Suppose you’re a D-word abolitionist wanting to talk to a D-word preservationist about voting restrictions. Above I showed how the abolitionist can guide that discussion in a non-D-word way. The abolitionist and the preservationist can talk about how long voting booths should be open, how to arrange mail-in voting, the role of poll observers, etc. They can have descriptive discussions about what happens when you change the laws that govern voting. They can also have normative

discussions about the goodness or badness of those changes. None of that requires the D-words.

I think that the normative discussions, in particular, will be improved if the questions are articulated without reliance on the D-word. For those who operate with an implicit assumption that being in the extension of “democratic” is good, it’s a useful exercise to make those implicit normative judgments explicit. They will have tacit beliefs of the form: what’s picked out by the D-words is a good thing because of X, Y, Z, where the implicit assumption is that X, Y, and Z are good. I’ll repeat a point I’ve made several times because it’s important. Making those kinds of assumptions explicit can only be useful. What happens too often is that claims of the form “that’s not democratic” are treated as themselves normative judgments, but the normative details are left nonspecific. That’s unfortunate. I showed in Chapter 3 that if the D-word means anything, it’s normatively neutral. The only way you can use it normatively is if you rely on the assumption that your interlocutors share your implicit normative judgments. That’s risky, since they might not share them, and if they don’t, that can generate yet another level of verbal dispute. It’s therefore much safer to make those normative judgments explicit. It’s intellectually lazy to rely on an implicit and obscure normative agreement hinted at by use of the D-word. Serious thinkers should tell us what that agreement is about—for example, whether easy access to mail-in voting is morally or prudentially good. To leave this kind of normative assumption unarticulated by hiding behind the use of the D-word doesn’t help to resolve these debates. This is evidenced by the endless cycles of both sides accusing the other of being “undemocratic.”

In short, if things go well, the D-abolitionists and the D-preservationists get along by speaking a D-purged language. That approach won’t always work, as it in effect assumes that the preservationist goes along with the abolitionist. What happens if the preservationist refuses to speak a D-purged language? First, the abolitionist can try to argue for doing so in a metalinguistic way, drawing on the kinds of arguments I’ve given above. Hopefully, that will convince the preservationist. If it doesn’t, then the abolitionist has three options:

1. She can just keep talking in her D-free language and ignore all her interlocutor’s uses of the D-word.
2. She can walk away. If an interlocutor insists on using words that you think make no sense, the conversation is pointless.

3. She can keep talking, but do so in a pretense way, just to be nice to the interlocutor. The abolitionist can pretend to understand the D-words, and in that way keep the conversation going at difficult junctures. Typically, such pretense will be harmless, and it might be worth doing to keep the conversation going.

Whatever option the abolitionist chooses, abolitionism implies a negative normative attitude towards preservationists. If the abolitionist is right, those who use the D-word speak a form of gibberish. They waste time in endless verbal disputes. They exploit meaningless (or mismatched) words for their lexical effects. It's quite natural to put the diagnosis in medical terms: the preservationists have a kind of cognitive and lexical virus—the D-words—that undermines their ability to speak, think, and communicate. This virus has spread widely across many linguistic communities. If this is the right analysis of the situation, then to some extent it's incumbent upon the abolitionists to try to “cure” the preservationists. One step in that direction is to write books, like this one, but I suspect that, in the long run, strategy 1 above is the most promising: insist on showing by example how conversations, arguments, and disagreements are cognitively improved by abandonment.

Improved and Less Dogmatic Thinking about Collective Decisions

I grew up in a part of the world (Norway) where belief in what's called “democracy” is a dogma. It's a bit like how some people have inherited unreflective religious beliefs. It's just assumed, without much argument, that what the D-words denote is the pinnacle of political organizations: there can be no better way for citizens to organize in a nation. This dogma is sometimes challenged by theorists, but alternatives are not live options in public discourse. The alternatives are invariably described using derogatory terms such as “tyranny” and “dictatorship.” It's as if the conceptual space leaves no room between the wonders of “democracy,” on the one hand, and the horrors of “tyranny,” on the other. We're in a weird situation where we spend almost unimaginable resources figuring out how to make new phones and batteries, but hardly any effort figuring out how to improve our collective decision-making (because we've got “democracy” and it's so amazing we never need to think about alternatives).

Imagine, and I agree that this is hard, that D-abolitionism became as prevalent as abolitionism about slurs. Those who now advocate for what they call “democracy” would ideally describe their preferred decision-making mechanism in a cool, objective, and D-free manner, and then compare it to alternatives. My bold conjecture is that if debates about political organization were conducted in that way, then there would be more openness to alternatives, and more motivation for improvement. We’d realize that the “best” way to make decisions in domain D for group G at time T will depend on:

- who the people are;
- what kinds of decisions people in that group need to make;
- their history;
- their culture;
- their geography;
- their economy;
- their education level;
- their relevant technology;
- many other things...

It’s implausible that there will be a single answer for all groups, all types of decisions, and all kinds of settings. There will (or should) be a great plurality of different methods to explore. Which of these is “best” for a particular group + decision domain + historical setting will be dependent on all the possible meanings of “best.” There’s no unique standard to appeal to, and we should expect conflict between different norms. The implementation in particular cases will be open to endless interpretation. In sum, if these political questions and answers are purged of the D-words, we might become a bit less dogmatic and there might be hope for progress.

PART IV

“DEMOCRACY” AMELIORATED

In an earlier book—*Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*—I explored the issues that arise when one tries to improve the meaning of an entrenched lexical item. A paradigm of this is Sally Haslanger’s work on gender and race terms (e.g., “man,” “woman,” and “black”). *Fixing Language* starts with the observation that many philosophers (and non-philosophers) engage in ameliorative projects, and then goes on to explore various interesting questions that arise if you’re into those kinds of projects. It also outlines a framework for articulating and responding to the challenges laid out. Given the prevalence of ameliorative projects, the book explores issues that are important, challenging, and philosophically enjoyable.

However, I should emphasize that *Fixing Language* doesn’t endorse any particular instance of Haslanger-style amelioration. It’s entirely conditional: *If you’re engaged in this kind of activity, then you should think about the following... and here is a way to think about those issues.* However, more often than not, conceptual defects are typically best avoided by introducing new vocabulary and leaving the old behind. In general, the combination of abandonment and lexical innovation is far superior to lexical amelioration. Expressions are not like boats. When a boat is broken, it often makes sense to fix it. It’s a waste to throw away a whole boat because of a few problems. But lexical items are different from boats. Fixing language through lexical preservation is more often than not a receipt for failure. Moreover, the alternative—abandonment—is free. The two chapters in Part IV illustrate the superiority of abandonment over amelioration using the D-words as a case study. I consider various efforts to ameliorate the D-words and show that this strategy is inferior to abandonment.*

* Thanks to Tristram McPherson for helping me think through the structure and place for the material in this part.

Ameliorations of “Democracy”

In light of the worries raised in the previous chapters, one might respond by trying to ameliorate the D-words. Instead of abandoning them, we can try to improve them. The ameliorator wants to give the D-words a meaning that is better than the current one. They aim to improve semantic, pragmatic, and communicative properties of the D-words. Sometimes this is done through “stipulative definitions.” At the simplest level, a stipulative definition takes the form of someone saying, “*I will use ‘T’ to mean G even if it doesn’t mean G in English.*” It’s a very normal practice, but nonetheless poorly understood.¹ A useful way to think about the practice is as a request that the author’s use of the expression be interpreted in the specified way. A stipulative definition of “democracy” doesn’t change the meaning of the expression in English, but it tells audiences how the speaker wants to be interpreted in that particular context. Sometimes it is also a suggestion that others start using the term in this way. Such requests are tacitly governed by norms. They typically aim to be *ameliorative*: they don’t aim for full descriptive adequacy, but rather aim to in some way *improve* on (for certain purposes) the natural language meaning. Strategies for doing this are found first in Carnap’s work on explication, and the Carnapian program has then been developed and refined in the later literature on conceptual engineering.²

This and the next chapter will criticize efforts to provide ameliorative stipulative definitions of the D-words. My criticism comes in two forms:

- **In this chapter, I focus on defects of *particular* ameliorative definitions:** I describe problems that spring out of various ameliorative proposals. Many of the most prominent proposals have defects that are not easy to fix—or at least, I don’t see how to easily fix them.
- **In the next chapter, I focus on the defectiveness of the ameliorative practice involving the D-words *as a whole*:** I argue that the entire practice of providing ameliorative definitions of the D-words is

¹ For a recent discussion, see Shields (2021).

² Carnap (1950); Cordes and Siegart (2018); Dutilh Novaes (2020).

problematic. It has led to massive amounts of verbal disputes and verbal (dis)agreement, and in general it has a tendency to undermine theoretical and public discourse.

None of what I discuss is proof that amelioration can't work, but it provides some intellectual push in that direction.

What Makes for a Useful Stipulative Definition?

In what follows, I'll work with five minimal assumptions about what would constitute a useful stipulative definition of the D-words.³

1. Extensional continuity: If I explicated “fish” to apply to all and only pancakes, that would be a silly and pointless joke. There has to be some kind of relevant continuity in what the term applies to. In the fish-to-pancake example, there's no overlap at all—no fish are pancakes.⁴ If, alternatively, we extended “fish” to apply to everything that lives (and can live) in the ocean, that would be more palatable, but we need to understand the upside of classifying, for example, crustaceans and whales with salmon. We'll also have to figure out what to do in counterfactual scenarios where, say, humans with scuba equipment live in the ocean. Are humans then fish? We're now in the business of figuring out the acceptable kinds of amelioration of “fish.”

One more observation about “fish” before turning to the D-words. Suppose someone tried to revise the meaning of “fish” so that it applies only to fish living in a certain part of the North Sea. That would be as bad as the fish-to-pancake proposal, but for a different reason. In order to understand “fish in the North Sea,” we need to understand “fish” in its full generality. So the restricting definition—relying as it does on a prior understanding of “fish” in full generality—is defective.

This applies to the D-words in two ways. First, it means that we should aim to avoid ameliorative proposals that diverge too radically from the current extension. What the term applies to with the new definition should

³ For an alternative—though not fundamentally different—account of the norms that govern stipulation, see Matthew Shields (2021), “On Stipulation.” An excellent feature of Shields's account is that it provides the resources for assessing when a proposed stipulation fails. My sense is that the proposals I discuss in what follows would be failures also on Shields's account.

⁴ There is something called a “fish pancake,” but it's not really a pancake.

overlap significantly with the current domain of application. Second, and this is a corollary, the ameliorative proposals must be general, and not restricted to just political structures. Political myopia (i.e., a definition that's restricted to just political structures and political decisions) is defective in the same way as a definition of "fish" that applies only to fish in the North Sea. Since I'll get back to this repeatedly, a quick reminder from Chapter 6:

- (i) Political myopia fails to respect the fact that many kinds of groups, of varied sizes and varied purposes, can be democracies. Many kinds of decisions, in different settings, made by different kinds of groups, for different purposes, can be democratic.
- (ii) Political myopia ignores the fact that *political democracy* is an instance of *democracy*. It's democracy applied to the political domain. If you don't understand "democracy" in itself, you don't understand "political democracy."
- (iii) As soon as you focus on the adjective "democratic," you are pushed towards abandoning political myopia. "Democratic" isn't modified in the same way as "democracy" is. There's no use of "political-democratic." A decision can be democratic or not, but it can't be "politically democratic." Democratic decisions can be made in all kinds of settings: a university, a hospital, a corporation, an NGO, a city, a nation-state, or an intergovernmental organization like the UN. Since even the politics-firsters presumably think that there's a close connection between "political democracy" and "democratic," and since "democratic" isn't politics-restricted, they at least need a non-political account of what it is to be "democratic."
- (iv) In Chapter 6 I presented a metaphysical conjecture: it's tempting to see the semantic interaction between "democracy" and "democratic" as reflecting the metaphysical structure of a democracy. What people call "a political democracy" is a structure in which many decisions are made in a democratic way. The fact that a group (a city, an organization, or a country) constitutes a democracy has to do with the kind and quantity of democratic decisions made by that group. So the idea of a democratic decision is more basic: we start with that, and then build up towards "a democracy." Democratic decisions (and laws, institutions, norms, etc.) are the building blocks of the things we call "democracies." So "democratic" comes first, then political (and other) democracies.

2. **Don't ignore the adjective:** A definition of “democracy” that isn't accompanied by a definition of “democratic” is defective. This is especially so if you're sympathetic to the metaphysical conjecture mentioned above—democracy supervenes on democratic.

3. **Substitutional smoothness:** If someone says they will use “democracy” to mean D, then we should be able to substitute D for “democracy” somewhat smoothly. If the meaning we're given for “democracy” isn't such that we can use it to smoothly interpret sentences containing the word “democracy,” something has gone wrong. This might seem too obvious to mention, but, surprisingly, we'll run into this problem again and again.

4. **Avoid massive gaps/indeterminacy—in particular, address the KQIE Structure:** In Chapter 6 I argued that an account of what it takes for a group to be in the extension of “democracy,” and for a decision to be in the extension of “democratic,” need an account of Kind, Quantity, Input, and Embedding for both “democracy” and “democratic.” If a definition doesn't address these features, it will have massive gaps, and that again leads to significant indeterminacy. That's not a fatal flaw, but it is a drawback.

5. **Respect the principle of lexical neutrality:** A reminder:

Principle of lexical neutrality: The meanings of the expressions ‘democratic’ and ‘democracy’ are normatively neutral—their meanings don't encode a normative assessment.

Recall: If a proposed definition violates this principle, it risks treating those in the Platonic anti-democracy tradition as *linguistically* incompetent or irrational. If, for example, the definition of “democracy” includes “democratic decisions are G,” where G is some normative term (say fair or just), then those who assert “democracy isn't G” (e.g., “democracy isn't fair or just”) are asserting a contradiction. Either they are linguistically incompetent (they don't understand the word), or they understand it but are committed to a contradiction. Both options are deeply uncharitable. More generally, it becomes irrational to have a discussion of whether democracy promotes G. That's unfortunate for a range of reasons, but it's particularly problematic because *no one* is a democracy proponent with respect to *all* decision-making (piloting of planes, brain surgery, etc.).

Let me emphasize right away that the discussion of proposed definitions in this chapter has a severe limitation. In order to keep the discussion at a reasonable length, I discuss only four proposals:

1. Thomas Christiano's definition of "Democracy" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
2. David Estlund's definition in his book *Democratic Authority*.
3. Joseph Schumpeter's and others' minimalist definitions.
4. A graded quantitative proposal with a focus on a proposal from Michael Coppedge et al.

These proposals are chosen because they are (i) by leading, influential theorists, and (ii) representative. What I have to say about them generalizes broadly, but, with such a restricted sample set, my procedure is far from foolproof.

One warning before getting into the substance: this chapter is intentionally (and also unfortunately) somewhat repetitive. The point throughout is that the various proposed stipulative definitions violate some of the adequacy conditions outlined above. Whenever that happens, I re-articulate the relevant adequacy condition. This is messy and repetitive, but I hope that it helps make clear how the particular definition is in violation. However, there's a quick way to read this chapter: just skip all those re-articulations, refer back to this section, and fill in the gaps yourself. That should be relatively easy and make the chapter a quick(er) read.

Ameliorative Proposal 1: Christiano—Democracy as Equality

Thomas Christiano's entry on "Democracy" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* starts in the way you would expect a piece of academic literature on "democracy" to start: with a definition. Christiano's definition is careful, and makes an effort to address at least some of the issues I raised in Chapter 2. Christiano says:

To fix ideas, the term "democracy," as I will use it in this article, refers very generally to a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making. (2008)

Christiano highlights four aspects of this definition:

First, democracy concerns collective decision-making, by which I mean decisions that are made for groups, and that are binding on all the

members of the group. Second, this definition means to cover a lot of different kinds of groups that may be called democratic. There can be democracy in: families, voluntary organizations, economic firms, states, transnational and global organizations. Third, this definition is not intended to have any normative weight. This definition of democracy is compatible with the belief that it is not desirable to have democracy in some particular context. Fourth, the equality required by this definition of democracy can be deep or shallow:

- Shallow equality: the mere formal equality of a one-person one-vote system in an election for representatives to an assembly where there is competition among candidates for the position.
- Deep equality: including equality in the processes of deliberation and coalition building.

Before turning to reasons for worrying about this definition, I want to emphasize that there’s a lot to be said in its favor. In particular, it’s an effort to describe a *general notion* that applies to groups other than just countries, and beyond the political domain (to families and smaller groups). It also explicitly respects the Principle of Neutrality. There are still some difficulties:

- Lack of substitutional smoothness.
- Significant indeterminacy and gaps. In particular, the proposed definition doesn’t tell us about the depth and kind of equality involved, or what counts as a participant.
- The proposed definition doesn’t tell us what an essential stage is (nor why we should focus on just one).

Substitutional smoothness: According to Christiano, the noun ‘democracy’ denotes a method by which groups make collective decisions. However, Norway is a democracy, but Norway is a country, not a method of group decision-making. When we say, “There are more democracies in Europe than in North America,” we don’t mean that there are more decision-making methods in Europe than in North America. So, initially the proposal seems like a category mistake.

This will seem like nitpicking, but it isn’t because the fix is non-trivial. One option is to treat this not as a definition of “a democracy,” but of the adjective “democratic,” and to say that a “democratic decision” is one that is made in a way that is “characterized by a kind of equality among the

participants at an essential stage of the collective decision-making process.” There are problems with that proposal that I will go through below, but right now note that we then don’t have an account of what “a democracy” picks out. Here’s a plausible elaboration: when certain kinds of decisions, and certain quantities of those decisions, are made in a democratic way, then the group is democratic. If that’s the view, then even if we accept the appeal to equality (see below for reasons not to), we need to specify those kinds and quantities of decision. Without that, there’s no theory, and no way to check what groups it applies to.

Indeterminacy and gaps: Christiano’s definition appeals to notions that generate definitional gaps, which again result in indeterminacy:

First gap: kind, quantity, and depth of equality: Remember a group is democratic, according to Christiano, if it makes decisions in a way that’s characterized by a certain kind of equality at an essential stage. I’ll focus on three parts of that: (i) the kinds of decisions in question, (ii) the quantity of those decisions, and (iii) the depth of equality.

- (i) Christiano doesn’t tell us what kinds of decisions a group must make in a democratic way in order to become “democratic.” That’s what I’ve called The Kind Question. Suppose that a group makes lots of decisions in what Christiano calls a “democratic” way, but all those decisions are just silly decisions (maybe, the color of balloons to be hung outside the parliament, the type of music to be played at a certain time, and the food to be served). Presumably, that would not suffice if the focus is on the political sphere, because that would make it really easy for a country to become democratic (just hold a bunch of democratic elections about silly issues like the ones just listed). On the other hand, for other groups (e.g., my family, or some other small democratic group), the color of balloons and the food to be served might be important decisions. So there can be no universal theory of the relevant kind of decision.
- (ii) The same goes for quantity: suppose you’ve specified what counts as the relevant kind of decision. Now we need to know how many of those decisions need to be made, such that, if made democratically, the group counts as a democracy. We also need a justification for that threshold. Again, this will be hard. Recall that even in paradigmatic democratic countries, *infinitely* many important and politically relevant decisions are made in non-democratic ways. How is the threshold determined for different groups in different

kinds of settings? Having settled on a quantity threshold, we want to know: is it dictated by the meaning of the word “democracy,” or does that meaning allow for massive variability in quantity?

- (iii) Finally, consider the depth of equality required. Christiano talks about “a kind of equality.” It cannot be Christiano’s view that just *any* kind of equality at an essential stage of collective decision-making suffices to make a decision democratic. If that’s not obvious, here is an example to make it clear:

Group G is about to make an important decision. At an essential stage of the collective decision-making, everyone affected by the decision gets a cookie and a hug.

In that case, there is *a* kind of equality (cookie and hug distribution) at an essential stage of the decision-making process. However, I’m confident Christiano would say that kind of equality is insufficient. There has to be a kind of substantive equality: an equality that matters. However, pushing in that direction is risky, because Canada and Norway are paradigms of “democracies.” In those countries, the core democratic activity is the pushing of a button (or the marking of a box on a piece of paper). These individual votes have no relevant impact whatsoever (in the obvious sense that the probability of an individual vote making a difference to any political decision is infinitesimally small). The equal distribution of cookies and hugs seems more substantive: at least you end up with a cookie and a hug! The problem is that very shallow equality results in massive overgeneration, and more substantive forms of equality result in massive undergeneration.

Shallow equality overgenerates; deep equality undergenerates: Suppose we operate with a very shallow notion of equality, under which there’s no clear limit on the kinds and quantity of democratic decisions that matter for a democracy. Then almost any group can satisfy the conditions. Even Harvard and North Korea have some decisions made in a way where there’s shallow equality at some essential stage of the decision-making process. If, on the other hand, Christiano requires deep equality, and a lot of it, then the theory will undergenerate massively because paradigms such as Norway and Canada won’t be democracies any longer. Remember, the pressure towards shallow equality is strong, because in paradigmatic democracies, for example Norway and Canada, the kind of equality that’s practically possible is shallow. Big groups of people and institutions—e.g., countries—require so many important decisions to be made that only an infinitesimally small

number of them can involve all the people affected by that decision, much less involve them in an equal way. At most we have here a very “shallow” form of equality where citizens (in a certain age group) get to vote, that is, push a button or write something on a piece of paper once in a blue moon, and where this act has a completely negligible effect on a few decisions (and where the power of this already limited effect will depend on how politicians decided to set election district boundaries).⁵

Second gap: who counts as a participant? In addition to “equality,” Christiano’s definition relies on two core notions that are not spelled out: “participants” and “essential stage.” Here are some problems that arise by relying on these notions. First, the notion of “participant.” To introduce this notion without saying more is pretty much a complete cop-out. It amounts to silence on one of the core questions that a theory of “democracy” should answer: who should participate in the “democratic process”? Some relevant considerations:

- In political settings, paradigmatic democracies exclude people under eighteen (or twenty-one, or sixteen; the point is that a significant part of the population is excluded), even though political decisions have massive influence on their lives. The justification for that cannot be that they know very little, or lack cognitive capacity, because that’s also true about most thirty-three-year-olds. As I’ve mentioned, the Hong Kong Philosophy department is democratic. However, note that lots of people affected by our decisions, most saliently students, don’t have a say at all in our department. Tenure decisions affect students, but they are excluded. Is there a principled way to justify these exclusions, or are they random?
- Decisions made by big countries have an impact far beyond the group of people who hold the relevant kinds of passports and are entitled to vote. Looking back at ancient Athens, it would seem problematic to classify that form of governance as “democratic,” because it excluded slaves and women. On the other hand, Norwegians exclude Swedes from their collective decision-making, and the Americans exclude Norwegians, even though both excluded groups are massively influenced by the relevant decisions.

⁵ The effect a Wyoming voter has on determining Wyoming’s electoral college representatives is much greater than the effect a California voter has on determining California’s representatives: a Californian has about a quarter of the impact of a Wyomingite.

- Suppose the rule for how to define “participants” is very flexible, as suggested by the above examples. Then it becomes really easy for a group, say a country, to become a democracy. It can just restrict the group of participants to, say, the President’s family members and close friends. If those are the only participants, then all it takes for the country to be democratic is for that little group to be treated as equals at some essential stage of decision-making.

Take-home lesson: a theory of how “democracy” works can’t leave a category like “participant” undefined. But it’s hard to see any coherent and principled way of clarifying the notion.

Third gap: what is an essential stage and why just one? Finally, some brief remarks on Christiano’s notion of “an essential stage of the decision-making process.” This is related to, but importantly different from, the points about quantity above. The Quantity Question concerns how many democratic decisions (of the relevant kind) need to be made in a democratic way in order for the group to be democratic. The Essential Stage Question moves the focus to the internal structure of particular decisions (of the kind that counts towards being a democracy). Some decisions—think of political decisions about building a new highway, or tenure decisions at a university—have many stages and take a very long time. It’s too much to ask that every stage of this sort of decision be characterized by a kind of equality among all the participants (see above for discussion of this idea). How many, and what kind of, stages of the decision-making process need to be democratic for the decision as a whole to be democratic? Christiano seems to be aware of this issue, and introduces the term “essential stage” in order to address it. However, he never tells us what counts as an essential stage, nor whether what counts as an essential stage is the same for a family, corporation, city, country, or philosophy department. Who gets to decide what counts as an essential stage? And, once we have settled that, why should only one of them be democratic? If there are 600 essential stages and the relevant kind of equality characterizes only one, then the remaining 599 stages are entirely non-democratic (i.e., not characterized by the relevant kind of equality). Why should the whole decision count as democratic?

The possibility of there being 600 essential stages also raises questions about why participants should be treated with some kind of equality at *the same essential stage*. Suppose that you have a long decision-making procedure, involving many stages over a period of time (typical for many important decisions). Many of these stages will be essential. There is no *one* stage where there’s a relevant kind of equality among participants. However,

all participants get to give input at *some* stage. Christiano’s definition would classify that procedure as non-democratic, because there’s no one stage at which all participants are treated as equals. That view, however, is unmotivated and unsupported by any data about how we use “democratic” and “democracy.” There is no reason why the participant input couldn’t be distributed between decision-making stages.

In sum: while Christiano’s definition has a great deal going for it, there are some significant difficulties. This is, of course, no fatal objection, but illustrates some of the often-overlooked difficulties of producing good ameliorative definitions of the D-words.

Ameliorative Proposal 2: Estlund on “Democracy” and Collective Authorization

In *Democratic Authority*, Estlund defines democracy as follows:

What I will mean by *democracy* is the actual collective authorization of laws and policies by the people subject to them. (2008: 38)

A lot then rides on the notion of “collective authorization.” Here is what Estlund has to say about that:

Democracy, the authorization of laws collectively by the people who are subject to them, is inseparable from voting. People are normally held to authorize laws by voting on the laws themselves or, more commonly, by electing representative legislators. What is it about voting that has this moral significance, the power to render the resulting laws legitimate and authoritative? One popular and simple answer is that voting is a fair procedure for making decisions when people disagree. Each person gets an equal say, and the result, whether it is good or just by any other standards, has at least this to be said for it: everyone has an equal role in determining the outcome. The outcome is fair in the sense that it was produced by a fair procedure. Let us call this view about how democracy renders laws legitimate and authoritative fair proceduralism. (66)

So, authorization is achieved via voting. Voting can make decisions legitimate and authoritative. A necessary condition for legitimacy and authoritativeness, according to Estlund, is that the decisions are arrived at in a fair way that gives equality of opportunity (which voting permits).

So “authorizing” means rendering decisions legitimate and authoritative, and one way of doing so is to ensure equality of opportunity among the deciders.

This definition of “democracy” inherits many of the defects of Christiano’s, but also adds to them.

Lack of generality and violation of the Principle of Neutrality: I’ll start with the obvious: Christiano’s definition aimed for generality, tried to avoid a focus on just the political domain, and was normatively neutral. Estlund’s definition doesn’t. It is targeted at *political structures* with the ultimate goal of characterizing how *laws* can be legitimate. As a result, the suggestion is similar to the proposed definition of “fish” that applies only to fish in the North Sea. Estlund’s definition also builds fairness directly into the definition of “democracy,” and in so doing violates the Principle of Neutrality.

A brief digression before moving on to other objections: it’s striking how two of the world’s leading theorists of democracy—Christiano and Estlund—take such radically different approaches to the definitional challenge. Christiano wants to respect both generality and neutrality. Estlund does not. That raises the concern that they are talking past one another—they are not even talking about the same thing. They are using the word “democracy,” but even these two speakers—at the highest intellectual level—fail to communicate. More on this in the next chapter.

Substitutional smoothness: According to Estlund’s definition, “democracy” denotes an event or a state of affairs: *the authorization of laws collectively by the people who are subject to them*. An authorization of a law is either an event (*the act of authorizing the law*) or a state of affairs (*that a law was authorized*). The paradigms of democracies, on the other hand, are groups, not events or states of affairs. Paradigms include countries, cities, organizations, and (some) philosophy departments. Those groups are not events or states of affairs of making something authorized. So the initial puzzlement is: why have a definition that so radically seems to violate the Principle of Extensional Continuity? The problem is not just that “democracy” fails to apply to what we thought it applied to. This definition also creates substitutional problems. Consider a sentence like:

There are many democracies in Europe.

If we substitute for “democracies” Estlund’s definition, we get:

There are many collective authorizations of laws and policies by the people subject to them in Europe.

That’s not what the sentence means. “Norway is a democracy” becomes “Norway is a collective authorization of laws and policies by the people subject to them.” Again, that is wrong.

Maybe the fix is easy: “a democracy” means (or picks out) “a group in which the authorization of laws is done collectively by the people who are subject to them.” On this view, “There are many democracies in Europe” means “There are many countries in Europe where the authorization of laws is done collectively by the people who are subject to them.” The sentence “Norway is a democracy” becomes “Norway is a country in which the authorization of laws is done collectively by the people who are subject to them.” This proposal, while still suffering from political parochialism, is a bit better, but (a) it creates problems for understanding ‘democratic,’ and (b) it generates significant gaps and indeterminacy. More on that below.

The adjective “democratic” and terminological consistency: A few pages after introducing his definition of “democracy,” Estlund writes,

I hope to vindicate a **democratic** account of political authority by reconciling two fundamental ideas. (2009: 39, my emphasis).

How does Estlund think that we should go from the definition of “democracy” (“the collective authorization of laws and policies by the people subject to them”) to the use of “democratic” to modify “account”? Estlund doesn’t tell us, and there’s no obvious way to do it. Consider an expression such as “democratic law,” where “democratic” modifies “law.” I just don’t see how to go from “*the authorization of laws collectively by the people who are subject to them*” to anything that helps us understand the adjective. The most plausible picture is one in which we find ourselves with an undefined “democratic.” As we have seen above, a definition of “democracy” that doesn’t extend to “democratic” (in other words, that fails to unify the adjective and the noun) is deeply problematic.

Gaps and indeterminacy: Unsurprisingly, questions about kind and quantity come up for the Estlund proposal, much as they do for Christiano. The kind question is the question of what kinds of decisions need to be made in a democratic way in order for a group to be a democracy. The quantity question concerns how many decisions of that kind need to be made in a democratic way for the group to be democratic. In any paradigmatic democracy, infinitely many decisions are not “authorized” by the people that are affected by those decisions. Moreover, the appeal to “voting” or “elections” is to be characterized as a “gap,” because there is no way that

Estlund would count any old election as satisfying this requirement. As Amartya Sen points out, “it is crucial to appreciate that democracy has demands that transcend the ballot box. . . . Balloting alone can be woefully inadequate, as is abundantly illustrated by the astounding electoral victories of ruling tyrannies in authoritarian regimes, from Stalin’s Soviet Union to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.” The point applies to direct and indirect democracy alike. So the appeal to “voting” is a gap that generates massive indeterminacy. You can, of course, fill that gap in various ways, but the more detail one goes into, the more controversial and baroque the definition becomes.

Again, none of this constitutes decisive objections to Estlund’s proposal. These are simply issues that someone using his definition might want to keep in mind and elaborate on.

Ameliorative Proposal 3: Schumpeter’s Minimalism

I move now to a very influential definition of “democracy” from the economist Joseph Schumpeter. It’s often referred to as a minimalist definition of “democracy” because it is short and builds very little into the definition. Schumpeter defines “democracy” simply as *the form of governance where political power is decided by people’s vote*. Schumpeter says:

Democracy means only that **the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. But since they might decide this also in entirely undemocratic ways, we have had to narrow our definition by adding a further criterion identifying the democratic method, viz., free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate.** (2010: 284–5; my emphasis)

In sum:

Schumpeter’s definition of democracy: a political system in which the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them, through free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate.

Minimalism contrasts with a view according to which elections are a means to an end, and where that end is what characterizes democracy. For example: according to Christiano’s view, voting is an *instrument* used to achieve a

kind of equality at an essential stage of a decision-making process. It's this equality that's at the core of democracy, not voting itself. For the minimalist, voting, and competition for votes, are the *essence of democracy*—they are not means towards democracy.

A core notion in Schumpeter's definition is "competition for leadership." To clarify that, he says that he has "restricted the kind of competition for leadership...to free competition for a free vote." Schumpeter emphasizes that he doesn't want to rule out forms of competition that are "unfair" or "fraudulent." In other words, the competition can be unfair and fraudulent (at least to some extent) and still be democratic. Here is Schumpeter's justification for that:

We...cannot exclude [unfair and fraudulent forms of competition] because if we did we should be left with a completely unrealistic ideal. Between this ideal case which does not exist and the cases in which all competition with the established leader is prevented by force, there is a continuous range of variation within which the democratic method of government shades off into the autocratic one by imperceptible steps. But if we wish to understand and not to philosophize, this is as it should be. The value of our criterion is not seriously impaired thereby. (2010: 271)

Schumpeter is a central figure in a larger tradition, called, unsurprisingly enough, minimalism about democracy. It has some adherents as such, but even when people don't explicitly call themselves minimalists, they can be seen as offering or presupposing a minimalist conception of democracy. One of the most influential contemporary minimalists is Adam Przeworski. Przeworski (1999) puts it simply: "democracy is just a system in which rulers are selected by competitive elections." He likes minimalism because his starting point is that it is "obvious that we want to avoid bloodshed, resolving conflicts through violence," and that holding elections is a means to that end. Ilya Somin (2013) expresses a minimalist view in both letter and spirit when he writes:

Democracy is rule by the people. The Greek word *demokratia*—from which "democracy" is derived—signifies exactly that: rule by the *demos*, the Greek word for the people. The day-to-day business of government may be conducted by elected officials. But those leaders are ultimately responsible to the public. If they fail to serve the interests of the voters, we

can “throw the bastards out” and elect a new set of “bastards” who will hopefully do better.

The limitations of this approach should be fairly obvious by now (given the previous discussion of Christiano and Estlund), but it’s worth reiterating some points (even though it will seem repetitive to do so).

Missing generality; political myopia: First note that minimalists fail to capture the general notion of “democracy” because they put politics and countries first. The objections to political myopia kick in here. Brief reminder: There can be democratic families, corporations, and clubs. In none of these groups is there a free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate. They can agree on how much to spend on a new coffee machine without having a vote for would-be leaders. These are paradigmatic democracies, and any theory that fails to classify them as “democracies” is descriptively wrong.

The missing adjective: Minimalists such as Schumpeter like to define “democracy,” but they tend to ignore “democratic.” A democracy, if it is anything, is a group where collective decisions are made in a democratic way. For example, decisions about how to organize garbage collection in a city. The democratic nature of such decisions isn’t captured by talking about free competition among would-be leaders. We need a separate definition of what it is to be democratic, and that (as I argued in Chapter 6) is more fundamental than the account of what it is to be “a democracy.” Some of what Schumpeter says about voting is revealing of his failure to pay attention to the adjective:

Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. But since they might decide this also in entirely **undemocratic** ways, we have had to narrow our definition by adding a further criterion identifying the **democratic** method... democracy seems to imply a recognized method by which to conduct the competitive struggle. (2010: 284–5; my emphasis)

Notice that Schumpeter here (like Estlund) relies on the undefined “democratic” to guide and motivate changes to the definition of “democracy.” Schumpeter, in effect, treats “democratic” as an undefined primitive. Of course, he is not explicit about that, but it is the best way to understand his appeal to what is “democratic” and “undemocratic” in motivating adjustments to the definition of “democracy.”

Recall that a distinctive feature of minimalism is that it’s supposed to be procedural: voting is what democracy is, not a way to achieve democracy. However, that aspect of the view is also undermined by the lack of attention to “democratic.” Consider the following dialogue:

- A: A nation is democratic if the citizens vote for representatives that make decisions D.
 B: Just any kind of voting—even corrupt, manipulated, elections between meaningless alternatives?
 A: No, that wouldn’t suffice. Just a certain kind of voting makes for democracy. It’s voting that satisfies some further conditions.
 B: How do you pick the relevant conditions?

Now A has some options:

- (i) If she relies on a notion of “democratic,” she can say that the relevant kind of voting has to satisfy certain democratic constraints. Then the need for a separate account of “democratic” becomes salient.
- (ii) She can try to characterize the relevant conditions without appealing to what is democratic. If she takes this approach, it’s not a requirement on the constraints on voting that they be democratic. That seems wrong: the central objections to various restrictions on voting is that they are “undemocratic.”

I think that Schumpeter is most naturally read as going for option (i). He is, it seems to me, looking for a method that satisfies a prior, non-procedural notion of “democratic.” What that notion is remains a mystery.

Again, I want to emphasize that these are not conclusive refutations. The idea of refuting a stipulative definition makes little sense. The points above are simply some indicators that more work is needed, and that this work is non-trivial.

Ameliorative Proposal 4: Indices of “Democracy”—Rich, Graded, and Quantitative Definitions

I turn now to a very different set of proposals, which aim to make democracy measurable and comparable. They aim to tell us whether, and to what extent, say, Argentina, is a democracy, and whether it’s more or less

democratic than Switzerland. There are many such cross-national indices. Those produced by Freedom House Polity2, the Polity Project, and the Economist Intelligence Unit are just a few examples.⁶ The goal of these indices is different from that of the definitions found in the more theoretical work I’ve addressed above: they aim to be empirically measurable, and to be of practical use in policy decisions. Regarding the motivation for such indices, Coppedge et al. say:

Billions of dollars in foreign aid intended to promote democracy and governance in the developing world is contingent upon judgments about how democratic a polity is at the present time, its recent history, future prospects, and the likely causal effects of giving or withholding assistance, which we discuss in our conclusion. Likewise, a large portion of work in political science deals with these same issues, i.e., the causes, consequences, and trajectories of regimes around the world. For both policymakers and academics – not to mention those living in the developing world, who are affected by rich-world policies – the conceptualization and measurement of democracy matters. (2011: 248)⁷

My discussion of these views will focus on the proposal in Coppedge et al. This paper is, from the point of view of my project, exceptionally useful. It’s sensitive to many of the philosophical questions that I’m concerned with in this book. Moreover, it comes close (but only close) to advocating for the view in this book. The paper also contains excellent objections to other democracy indices. However, it still suffers from some of the flaws I’ve discussed earlier.

The Problems with Traditional Democracy Indices

Democracy indices, such as those produced by Freedom House, identify many different dimensions. Countries are then assigned a score on each of these dimensions. The scores are aggregated, and the result is a quantitative

⁶ Respectively, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>, <https://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>, <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf>, although it’s better to do an internet search to get the most up-to-date one.

⁷ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/conceptualizing-and-measuring-democracy-a-new-approach/DAF249E74DDD3ACE3FFC96F20EE4074D>.

way to compare the degree of democracy across nations. The hard problems for this procedure are:

- What are the dimensions, and what is the methodology for picking dimensions? What makes them dimensions of “democracy”?
- How do you assign a score along each dimension, and what do the scores mean?
- How do you aggregate the scores on each dimension into a single “democracy” score?

In other words, the development of these indices assumes that the question “What does it take to be an instance of ‘a democracy?’” has an answer with the form:

- (i) what it takes to be a democracy is to have features $F_1 \dots F_n$;
- (ii) we can quantify these features (either with “yes” or “no,” or as a degree); and
- (iii) these features can be aggregated.

If an index tracks features that aren’t required for a group to be a democracy, then the index is fundamentally flawed: it pretends to measure what “democracy” stands for, but doesn’t. If a particular index managed to find elements that were necessary and sufficient conditions for being “a democracy,” it would then need the aggregation mechanism to be correct. For that to be the case, it has to be part of the meaning of “democracy” that features $F_1 \dots F_n$ must combine in a way that produces a degree of democracy. Both of these assumptions are entirely implausible. We’ve seen above how hard it is to justify even one necessary condition.

These indices are, in effect, like someone who wants to measure the degree to which a particular room is a kitchen. That’s difficult because there are many kinds of kitchens in different places, cultures, and time periods. Nonetheless, we assume that a kitchen on a boat, in a big Parisian restaurant, in a tent, and in a small apartment have something in common that makes them kitchens. I won’t try to answer the question of what kitchens are, but here’s a procedure that would be really silly: we ask chefs in European restaurants what they think should be in a kitchen, and then we make a list, maybe something like:

- Does it have many kinds of forks?
- How much storage space is there?
- Does it have a dishwasher and, if so, how big is it (higher score for bigger dishwasher)?
- Does it have a microwave?
- Are there different kinds of temperature zones in the refrigerator?
- Are the tabletops made from wood or marble?
- Is there a safe place to store knives?
- Does it have a popcorn machine? If so, how big is it?
- Is there an ice cream machine?

Now we can quantify the answer to each of these questions and make sure they are separable, so the answer to one doesn't affect the answer to the other. Finally, we can imagine someone trying to use this to assign a degree of *kitchenhood* to various candidate kitchens: a kitchen on a boat will score very low, and be less of a kitchen than one in a fancy restaurant. It is, I hope, obvious that this is silly. It fails to distinguish between features that are essential to kitchens and features that the list-makers happen to like or approve or need for particular purposes in particular settings. It's a fundamentally *parochial list*. The list that's supposed to help us quantify democracy is parochial in the same way: it's a list of things that some people in a particular cultural and historical setting like (or need or care about).

This isn't the only problem these projects have. They also share many of the problems that I outlined when discussing Schumpeter and Estlund: they are focused exclusively on “political democracy,” and so don't have an account of “democracy” more generally. They also fail to address the adjective “democratic”: they try to provide an account of “a democracy,” without explaining what it is for a particular decision to be democratic. So the accounts inherit some of the problems I've been highlighting earlier in this chapter. Coppedge et al. are aware of some of these problems, but I'm not convinced they're able to do much better.

Coppedge et al.'s Positive Proposal

Coppedge et al.'s criticism of previous proposals focuses on the lack of agreement about definitions. They say:

Since definitional consensus is necessary for obtaining consensus over measurement, the goal of arriving at a single universally accepted measure of democracy is, in some very basic sense, impossible. If one cannot agree on what X is, one cannot measure X in an authoritative fashion. (2011: 248)

Note that this isn't the same as the objection I have been pursuing above: the lack of agreement in itself isn't an objection to a definition. The fact of disagreement, in itself, isn't a reliable indication of a theory being wrong, though it might be relevant in the long run. Putting that aside, Coppedge et al. conclude that “The task of constructing a global index of democracy that is valid and precise, and universally acknowledged as such, is well-nigh impossible....”

However, this is not to say that they give up on developing a global index: “Our proposal... is not to do away with extant indices but rather to create a new set of indicators....” Their model has three parts:

- a. They start with six conceptions of “democracy”: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian.
- b. Then they have thirty-three mid-level components.
- c. Finally, each of the mid-level components is broken into low-level indicators.

To give a sense of how this works, here is what they say about the six “conceptions” of democracy:

Our intention here is to capture various possible conceptions of democracy without making judgments about how they might be combined or how they might contribute to a summary index. Our claim is that these six conceptions describe our subject in a fairly encompassing fashion and that each conception is logically distinct and – at least for some theorists – independently valuable. That is, some writers believe that enhanced avenues for participation are good for democracy even in the absence of electoral or liberal dimensions of democracy. Some writers believe that more equal access to resources has a beneficial impact on democracy (through political equality) even in the absence of electoral or liberal dimensions of democracy. (255)

To give readers a clear sense of the project, here below (so you don't have to look back to Chapter 8) is the entire list of mid-level components (derived from the six conceptions of democracy).

1. Sovereignty: the degree to which a polity is able to govern itself in its domestic and foreign policies, free from interference from other polities (aside from treaty agreements and regular international-system constraints).
2. Authority: the degree to which central governmental authority is preeminent throughout the territory claimed as part of the polity. (If the government has no authority outside the capital, then the rest of the territory is not governed by whatever rules that polity has established.)
3. Elective government: the extent to which executive functions are handled by officials chosen by election.
4. Male suffrage: the extent to which adult males have the right to vote in elections.
5. Female suffrage: the extent to which adult females have the right to vote in elections.
6. Turnout: the level of participation in elections and other officially sponsored consultations.
7. Regular elections: the extent to which elections are held regularly and on schedule, according to the constitution.
8. Free elections: the extent to which parties and candidates can gain access to the ballot, compete for votes in an environment free of government interference, and have their votes counted and allocated fairly. Also, the extent to which citizens are able to register to vote.
9. Access to media and campaign finance: the extent to which all parties/candidates are granted equal access to the media and to campaign finance, proportional to their support in the electorate.
10. Executive rule of law: the extent to which the executive (and persons and agencies under his/her control) follows the law, as defined by the constitution, treaties, statutes, and as interpreted by the judiciary.
11. Executive constraints: the extent of effective constraints on the executive (whether by elective or non-elective bodies).
12. Legislative power: the extent to which the legislature controls the executive—with parliamentary systems understood as defining one end of the continuum and systems dominated by a separately selected executive unaccountable to the legislature, or systems in which the legislature is entirely absent, defining the other end.
13. Judicial independence: the extent to which the highest judicial bodies are independent of the executive and other outside influences.

14. Judicial review: the extent to which the highest judicial bodies are able to review acts of legislation and other governmental actions in the light of constitutional provisions, and the extent to which such decisions are respected by other bodies.
15. Party strength: the extent to which parties are institutionalized (rather than simply the vehicle for specific candidates) and centralized (in organizational structure, electoral behavior, and legislative behavior).
16. Party ideology: the extent to which parties have well-defined, consistent, and coherent ideologies.
17. Party system size: the number of parties gaining seats in the national legislature and party system fractionalization (weighting parties by their relative size).
18. Electoral system proportionality: the absence of barriers to representation for small parties, both as a product of district magnitude, thresholds, and other statutory restrictions.
19. Competitiveness: the closeness of the vote between the two highest vote-getters in a national election.
20. Turnover: the change in (a) party control and (b) individual control over (c) the executive and—if different—(d) the most powerful office in the land.
21. Media development: the extent to which major media outlets are independent, free to air diverse political views, and able to reach the citizenry.
22. Civil society independence: the extent to which civil society (excluding parties and media) is independent of the state and able to voice opinions critical of political leaders.
23. Civil society political engagement: the extent to which civil society (excluding parties and media) is engaged in politics—both electoral and consultative.
24. Subnational government elections: the extent to which there are subnational governments elected through free and fair elections.
25. Unevenness in democratic development: whether some subnational governments are significantly more or less respectful of civil liberties and free and fair elections than others in the polity.
26. Direct democracy: the extent to which opportunities exist for citizens to engage directly in policy-making (e.g., through referenda).
27. Civil liberty: the extent to which citizens enjoy freedom of speech and freedom from politically motivated persecution by government.

28. Property rights: the extent to which property rights are protected.
29. Religious freedom: the extent to which freedom of religion is guaranteed.
30. Equal resources: the extent to which resources such as income, education, and health—which may impact the possibility of participating in politics—are widely and equally available.
31. Gender equality: the extent to which women achieve equal representation in the legislature and other high positions within government.
32. Ethnic equality: the extent to which underprivileged ethnic groups (defined by race, religion, caste, or other ascriptive characteristics) are granted formal rights to suffrage and to positions of power within the government, as well as the extent to which such groups actually vote and gain representation in the legislature and other high positions within government.
33. Inclusive citizenship: the degree to which all citizens and permanent residents enjoy the protections of the law.

They say that their proposal is an advantage over the kinds of indices that they aim to replace. It's impossible for theorists and others to converge on one thing that “democracy” denotes, and even if they could, it wouldn't be informative, because the level of abstraction is too high. It's more productive, they suggest, to “recognize the multiple conceptions of democracy and, within each conception, to disaggregate.” The various components, measured through their proposed indices, are easier to track: “While the world may never agree on whether the overall level of democracy in India is summarizable as a ‘4’ or a ‘5’ (on some imagined scale), we may agree on scores for this and other countries at the level of conceptions, components, and indicators.”

Assessment of the Coppedge et al. Proposal: The Good and the Bad

Let me start with what I think is excellent about this proposal: it gets rid of the focus on “democracy,” and instead focuses on, for example, the thirty-three components on the list, the indicators, and the interconnections between the indicators and components. It treats claims of the form “India is a democracy to degree 5” as meaningless, and thus pointless. Moreover, it shows us how it is easy to do better: just focus on the details, at a lower level

of abstraction. This part of the Coppedge et al. proposal is in effect an argument for abandonment.

Unfortunately, Coppedge et al. do not entirely relinquish the “democracy” crutch, and both the details of their account and its theoretical framework are in part undermined by their continued attachment to “democracy.” Their proposal is presented as a way to help those who care about democracy make practical decisions, for example about funding to various nations. So understood, the overall goal is not to get people to abandon “democracy.” On the contrary, it’s a defense of the continued importance of the notion. Their positive model relies on what they call “six conceptions of democracy.” They don’t tell us what “conceptions” are, nor do they tell us what “democracy” means in the expression “conceptions of democracy.” Their underlying assumption seems to be that there is a thing—democracy—of which there are different conceptions. Their model is an effort to capture all these different conceptions. However, even though they criticize previous indices for not justifying what components they track, they also don’t justify tracking their particular conceptions (and the components that each tracks). Think of it like this: suppose we have six lists of components (alleged elements of democracy). Suppose each is unjustified and random. Why would combining these six defective lists be any better than sticking with one of them? The combination of six inherits the defects of all six.

Moreover, the list of six lists (i.e., the six conceptions) resists this kind of aggregation, because they are not compatible. They are incompatible both at the level of specific elements of the indices and at a more general level: it is not part of any of the electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, or egalitarian “conceptions of democracy” that the *disjunction* of all of these is an improvement on any one of them. The disjunctive view is not a compromise, but in effect another conception: a very liberal one that’s in danger of being internally inconsistent (because it tries to encompass too much). Here is an analogy. There are lots of views about what a god is, whether there is a god, and if so, how many there are. Imagine someone suggesting a solution to this: *“Let’s combine all of them, and call them different conceptions of god. Then if we track all of the conceptions, we’re safe in that we track god.”* That doesn’t work, because many of the conceptions rule out the others.

Political myopia and the missing adjective: Coppedge et al.’s account also suffers from two by now familiar problems: political myopia and the missing adjective. Coppedge et al. acknowledge the first problem, but they have no solution to it. They say:

Our principal concern is with the operation of democracy within large and fairly well-defined political units (e.g., nation-states) which we shall refer to as polities. The sizable population of these units presumes that representative institutions will be significant in the political process (insofar as they are democratic), though it certainly does not preclude more direct forms of citizen governance existing side-by-side with representative institutions. We are less concerned with democracy within very small communities (e.g., neighborhoods, school boards, corporations), in contexts where the political community is vaguely defined (e.g., transnational movements), or on a global level (e.g., the United Nations). This is not to say that the concept of democracy should be restricted to formal and well-defined polities. It is simply to clarify our approach to definition and measurement, and to acknowledge that different strategies might be required for different subject areas. (252)

Recall the Hong Kong University philosophy department: it's a paradigm of a democracy. However, we wouldn't even register on any of the democracy indices, because we have no political parties, no media, no legislature, no subnational competitive elections, no sovereignty (in the relevant sense), department members have no access to the press, etc. The reply to this is: we just want to capture a subset of democracies—democracies in domain D. We've already repeatedly seen what is wrong with this: you then presuppose that you know what democracy, *simpliciter*, is. If you don't know what democracy is in general, how are you going to find it in domain D (e.g., the political domain)? If you think (as Coppedge et al. do) that it's already impossibly hard to find in a chosen domain, it certainly can't be any easier in general (i.e., covering all domains).

This generality constraint is connected to the absence of an account of the adjective “democratic.” The indices, including the one proposed by Coppedge et al., have nothing to say about what it is for a particular decision to be “democratic.” They are focused on larger social structures and institutions, but fail to tell us what makes it the case that a particular decision in a particular setting is democratic (or is democratic to a certain degree). However, democracies are built up from a foundation of democratic decisions—if there are any democracies, then they are at least partly grounded in democratic decisions.

Quantitative measures are efforts to measure the degree of democracy in a country. What they don't tell us is when a particular decision in a group (e.g., a country or a department or a club) is made in a democratic way.

Recall that the adjective “democratic” is (at least sometimes) used to describe particular decisions made in a particular setting for a particular group. For example, suppose a university makes a decision to merge two departments. Now we can ask: was that decision made in a democratic way? Was it a democratic decision? The answer to that question depends on specific features of that event. Let’s say that this happens in a country that scores high on the “degree of democracy” scale. So far, that tells us nothing about this particular decision. Lots of decisions made by Norwegian universities, companies, organizations, and families are non-democratic. We get no help whatsoever from the various lists in figuring that out. Of course, as I pointed out above, these measures are not meant to answer those questions. But their inability to do so highlights the many ways in which these accounts fail to match up with our ordinary notion of democracy. The question in this book is whether that notion is worth preserving.

Conclusion and Looking Ahead

The big picture: in the previous chapters I made a case for abolitionism. That option has historically been an unpopular one. Instead, theorists have opted for stipulative, ameliorative definitions. This strategy is lexically conservative in that it keeps the word “democracy,” while giving it an improved meaning (better than the ordinary language meaning). This chapter has looked at some attempts to do that. Let me re-emphasize one limitation of the above discussion: I’m not claiming that the points raised are conclusive refutations of any of the proposed stipulative definitions. I don’t know that a stipulative definition even can be refuted. We can, at best, come up with some concerns that make the proposals seem ill-advised. Many of the proposed ameliorative definitions of the D-words are problematic, even if we assume just some very basic constraints like those given at the beginning of this chapter (generality, neutrality, smoothness, include the adjective, and avoidance of excessive indeterminacy).

However, and this is crucial, my main concern with the ameliorative strategy isn’t the failure of particular instances of amelioration. There might be ways around the concerns I’ve raised here. My main concern is, rather, that this entire practice, even if it were improved, has created a very bad environment for the D-words. The current practice is already so degenerate that it systematically results in a massive amount of verbal disputes, and faux agreements and disagreements. It undermines communication and

rational discourse about important topics. This is the point of the next chapter, and it's independent of the flaws of any particular stipulative definition. Suppose that we had a practice of using the D-words where there were, say, 280 pretty good ameliorative definitions in play (i.e., all 280 satisfied the 5 minimal conditions set out at the beginning of this chapter). That could still be a disastrous practice if there was insufficient coordination between the uses of these varied definitions.

Verbal Disputes about “Democracy”

I ended the previous chapter by saying that the practice of using the D-words has degenerated to a point where amelioration, even if done well, is hopeless. Here is what I have in mind: suppose that someone comes up with ameliorative definitions of the D-words that not only satisfy the desiderata I worked with in the previous chapter (extensional continuity, substitutional smoothness, preservation of the adjective, normative neutrality, and the avoidance of glaring gaps/indeterminacy) but also have other wonderful features. Even if that happened, using those definitions would be a bad idea because the general pattern of discourse involving the D-words is insufficiently coordinated for using them to succeed (even on the hypothesis that the proposed definitions are intrinsically brilliant). In this chapter, I spell out what I mean by “insufficiently coordinated.”

To get going, note that it’s not controversial that there has been a failure to converge on a definition of “democracy.” Laza Kekic, one of the Directors of the Economist Intelligence Unit, writing an introduction to their Index of Democracy, says:

There is no consensus on how to measure democracy, definitions of democracy are contested, and there is an ongoing lively debate on the subject. The issue is not only of academic interest. For example, although democracy-promotion is high on the list of American foreign-policy priorities, there is no consensus within the American government on what constitutes a democracy. As one observer recently put it, “the world’s only superpower is rhetorically and militarily promoting a political system that remains undefined—and it is staking its credibility and treasure on that pursuit.” (Kekic 2007: 1)

One leading theorist of democracy—Larry Diamond—starts one of his papers as follows:

Few conceptual issues in political science have been subjected to closer or more prolific scrutiny in recent decades than this problem of “what democracy is...and is not,” and which regimes are “democracies” and which not. We are replete with definitions and standards and tools of measurement. But the curious fact is that—a quarter-century into the “third wave” of democratization and the renaissance it brought in comparative democratic studies—we are still far from consensus on what constitutes “democracy.” (2002: 21; my emphasis)

That there is a lack of convergence is obvious and not up for discussion. What is entirely *unobvious* is how to react to that fact. What surprises me is that those who know about this fact—and write about it—seem entirely *unconcerned*. They consider it an interesting, slightly curious fact, but in no way a serious problem. It does nothing to shake their confidence in the notion of “democracy.” Even if you’re not on board with all the criticism I’m about to present of the practice of using the D-words, it seems to me that, at a minimum, it’s intellectually irresponsible to willfully ignore issues about lack of convergence. Lack of convergence is potentially disastrous, and so should be a source of intellectual and existential panic among D-preservationists.

In the rest of this chapter, I elaborate on these programmatic remarks under three interrelated headings:

1. Verbal Disputes.
2. Interactive Content Flow.
3. Normative Sneak.

Again, it’s worth emphasizing the obvious: none of what I say here amounts to conclusive proof that the ameliorative strategy is a bad one. Rather, consider it a challenge that needs to be addressed (but that so far has been nonchalantly ignored).

Verbal Disputes

There is currently an extremely large number of proposed ameliorative definitions of the D-words. One result of this large quantity is a massive amount of verbal disputes. This should be pretty obvious, but the easiest way to see it is to take an author who defines ‘democracy’ in a certain way in

a paper (i.e., says explicitly: “By ‘democracy’ I mean M”), and then goes on to talk about other authors’ views about democracy when those other authors don’t mean M by their use of “democracy.” This kind of situation can generate fake (dis)agreement. Here are some illustrations, and I hope that it is obvious how to generate more examples of this kind.

Recall the start of Christiano’s entry on “Democracy” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “To fix ideas, the term ‘democracy,’ as I will use it in this article, refers very generally to a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making.” So that’s what Christiano wants “democracy” to mean when he uses it in that article. The problem, then, is that he spends the entire article talking about other theorists’ views about democracy. He says, for example:

Not all instrumental arguments favor democracy. Plato (*Republic*, Book VI) argues that democracy is inferior to various forms of monarchy, aristocracy and even oligarchy on the grounds that democracy tends to undermine the expertise necessary to properly governed societies. In a democracy, he argues, those who are expert at winning elections and nothing else will eventually dominate democratic politics. (2008: §2.1.2)

About Hobbes, he says:

Hobbes (1651, chap. XIX) argues that democracy is inferior to monarchy because democracy fosters destabilizing dissension among subjects. But his skepticism is not based in a conception that most people are not intellectually fit for politics. On his view, individual citizens and even politicians are apt not to have a sense of responsibility for the quality of legislation because no one makes a significant difference to the outcomes of decision making. (§2.1.2)

The section on “Legislative Representation” starts:

A number of debates have centered on the question of what kinds of legislative institutions are best for a democratic society. What choice we make here will depend heavily on our underlying ethical justification of democracy, our conception of citizenship as well as on our empirical understanding of political institutions and how they function. (§5.1)

The details don't matter much here, but what is important is that these examples instantiate the obvious and crucial fact that a lot of the theoretical literature on democracy engages with other literature on democracy. The aim is to present, compare, criticize, and develop ideas presented by others. That's problematic when there's a plethora of diverging stipulative definitions in a discipline, and more generally when a discipline is terminologically undisciplined. Focus on the term “democracy” in the passage about Plato and ask:

Does that word (when used to describe Plato's view) mean what Christiano said he would mean by it in this article?

If yes, then Christiano is claiming that Plato had a concept of democracy that coincides with Christiano's. That's not true—on that interpretation he would be misinterpreting Plato. Suppose, on the other hand, that the answer is “no.” Then the word “democracy” in the sentence

Plato (*Republic*, Book VI) argues that democracy is inferior to various forms of monarchy, aristocracy and even oligarchy on the grounds that democracy tends to undermine the expertise necessary to properly governed societies. (§2.1.2)

means something other than the stipulated meaning. Then:

- A. We don't know what “democracy” means here, beyond that it isn't what the word means in the rest of the article. Maybe Christiano has reverted to the English word with its English meaning. If so, then the ordinary notion needs to make sense for the article to make sense. If so, then the investigation into the ordinary notion takes on direct relevance: we need to understand the ordinary notion and its relation to the stipulative meanings.
- B. We get faux agreements and disagreements, (because answering “no” to the question above introduces a variety of meanings of the same term). Things get even more complicated when Hobbes gets into the picture. More confusion is added when we're talking about all the different people who are involved in debates about legislative institutions. We don't know who they are, but it's fair to assume that hardly any of them are aware of (much less deferential to) Christiano's definition in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or to Plato's meaning, whatever that is.

The general idea here should be fairly straightforward. For an economist, it makes a lot of sense to talk about what other economists have said using “indirect utility function,” because the definitions of this term have largely converged. In the case of the 2,000-year-old intellectual tradition of talking about democracy, there has been no convergence on a definition, and so these debates are massive and depressive exercises in verbal disputes.

Since these points are important, here are a couple more illustrations of how the lack of terminological coordination leads to confusion:

- At first glance it might look like Przeworski and Estlund agree that democracy involves voting. Przeworski says that democracy is “a system in which rulers are selected by competitive election,” while Estlund says that “the idea of democracy is, or at least includes, the idea of citizens... voting for laws, and/or for officeholders who make them.” So, it sounds like both Przeworski and Estlund say that democracy is something that involves voting. But it would be incorrect to say that they are in agreement. For Estlund, it’s a fundamental feature of an acceptable democratic regime that it be authoritative, where authorization is a weighty moral notion: “the idea of democracy is, or at least includes, the idea of citizens collectively authorizing laws by voting for them, and/or for officeholders who make them” (2008: 65).

Throughout his work, Estlund defends the epistemic merits of democracy, saying that it’s the best option when subject to the legitimacy constraint: “But democracy is better than random and is epistemically the best among those that are generally acceptable in the way that political legitimacy requires” (8).

By contrast, Przeworski’s theory is based on the fundamental constraint that “it is obvious that we want to avoid bloodshed,” not on weighty normative assumptions. So Przeworski and Estlund, although they end up asserting the same sentence, are talking past one another.

- For a final example, let’s look at the quantitative measure. As we have seen, these kinds of measures don’t define “democracy” the way Christiano, Estlund, Schumpeter, or Przeworski do. Instead, they have a range of dimensions on which countries are measured, and a country’s final score determines how democratic it is. Here are the Polity 4 “full democracy” countries for 2018: Australia, Austria, Canada, Cape Verde, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mauritius, Mongolia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago.

Here is the Economist Intelligence Unit ranking for 2018. The following countries, per the Economist Intelligence Unit’s measures, count as “full democracies”: Australia, Austria, Canada, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Mauritius, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Uruguay.

Simply eyeballing the list should make the faux agreement and disagreement. For Polity, Hungary is a full democracy, but not for the Economist Intelligence Unit. Do they disagree on Hungary being a full democracy? No, they use different measures, so what they are disagreeing about is the definition of “full democracy.” That should also undermine confidence that they truly agree when they both classify, say, Spain, as a full democracy. As this case illustrates, moving to quantitative methods does not make the problem go away.

Verbal Disputes and Topic Continuity

Many readers of early drafts of this book pointed out that my own earlier work could provide some solace for the ameliorators. A central claim in Cappelen (2018) is that not all differences in meaning result in verbal disputes. Some meaning changes, I argue, are *topic preserving* (see Cappelen 2018: Pt. III). A Potential paradigms of meaning change that is topic preserving is the gradual change in the meaning of “salad” from a dish that’s primarily leaf-based to a dish that can contain very little or no leaves (e.g., a fruit or seafood salad). Maybe, in that case, we’re still talking about *the same thing*—salad. To back that up, you would need a theory of topic continuity. In Cappelen (2018) I provide a sketch of such a theory. Here is a possibility: the users of ameliorative definitions of “democracy” differ on the details, but they are all talking about the same thing: *democracy*. That topic is what ties it all together. They are all talking about *democracy*, despite operating with different stipulative definitions (where that italicized “democracy” in this sentence denotes the topic).

This strategy is worth exploring, and I like that it builds on my earlier work on topic continuity (a view that, to put it mildly, isn’t universally accepted). However, I’m not overly optimistic that we can model different stipulative uses of “democracy” on the gradual evolution of, say, “salad.” The whole point of a stipulative definition is to stick to that very meaning and not use other meanings. For example, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s

democracy index isn't just another way to talk about what minimalists such as Przeworski talk about. The minimalists really don't want to include sixty-six different socioeconomic components beyond voting. That's the whole point of minimalism: it's minimal and focused just on voting. As another example, those who, like Christiano, want "democracy" to be normatively neutral really don't endorse definitions that involve what I've called in Chapter 6 normative sneak. More generally, the careful thought that goes into these definitions motivates continuous attention to fine-grained differentiations. This is more like a case in which someone very explicitly, and after careful reflection, says that they don't want "salad" to refer to concoctions made primarily from seafood or fruit. If they really don't want their use of "salad" to apply to fruit salads, then charity tells us to respect this.

Interactive Content Flow

In some cases, there's an interactive content flow between the theoretical domain and the practical. If what is said in the theoretical domain influences the practical and vice versa, then content coordination becomes particularly important. First, I'll provide an illustration of when there isn't interactive content flow, then an illustration of when there is interactive content flow, and finally the implications for uses of "democracy":

- *Illustration of no interactive content flow: physics.* In the case of physics, there's no influence from ordinary speakers using "mass" on the theoretical use of "mass." No physicist cares about how regular citizens or non-experts use the term "mass"—their usage of the term makes no difference to what physicists think about mass.
- *Example of importance of interactive content flow: medicine.* In medicine, there's pressure to make the theoretical terms used to describe illnesses and treatments accessible and intelligible to non-experts (in particular, patients). As an illustration of someone who ignores the importance of interactive content flow in medicine, consider Marc Ereshefsky's suggestion that we abandon "health" and "disease." Ereshefsky's suggestion is **not** that ordinary speakers abandon these terms. He suggests that "when health care professionals, social scientists, or humanists discuss controversial medical cases, those discussions should be framed in terms of state descriptions and normative claims rather than in terms of health and disease." He says that his proposal "does not attempt to

reform our use of language but instead offers terminology to help clarify technical discussions.” You can see how that’s a strategy that might be appealing in political science as well (more on that below). It is, however, problematic, because of the continuous need for interactive content flow in medicine: the professionals need to tell non-professionals what conclusions they have reached. Then they need to justify and explain their decisions. Should they keep it a secret that they’re speaking a different (“health-” and “disease-”free) language, or should they use a translation manual? If they use a translation manual, then why do they need the special (“health-” and “disease-”free) language in the first place? It would erode trust in doctors if they were viewed as saying different things to different audiences. And what does the layperson do if they want to file an insurance claim and they don’t know where they fit in the medical taxonomy?

- *Interactive content flow in politics.* To see the importance of interactive content flow in politics, notice that this case contrasts with healthcare in that the decision makers are citizens and politicians: those are the people who make political decisions. In healthcare, we have a decision-making system where professionals and experts make the decisions. In politics, we let just anyone make a decision: citizens get to vote even if they are completely ignorant about politics, and representatives are not required to have any kind of expertise or particular knowledge. That makes interaction between real-world politics and political theory even more fluid. The upshot of this: don’t create lexical obstacles to interactive content flow. The use of “democracy” as a technical term with a plethora of different stipulative definitions does exactly that, and so is counterproductive.

Normative Sneak

I want to re-emphasize the point that I have made before—many of the revisionist definitions suffer from a problem that I called normative sneak:

Normative sneak is what happens when someone takes a descriptive expression, gives it a revisionist definition, and the revised definition includes normative terms.

This is a sneaky move (hence the name) because it enables you to disguise normative claims as descriptive claims. When you engage in normative

sneak, you in effect transform a descriptive term into a vehicle for expressing your preference, or normative attitudes in general, under the guise of not doing so. As a constructed example, consider the term “philosopher.” That term is not itself used to express an assessment of the person that’s being so described. If someone is a philosopher, it’s an open question whether they are a courageous, fun, or good person. Suppose I introduce a technical term “philosopher”:

A philosopher is a person who spends a significant amount of time doing philosophy and is kind and good.

We started with a term that simply described a person engaged in a kind of intellectual activity. That term doesn’t assess the person or that activity in any way. The redefined term, however, gives a rich normative assessment of the person (as good and kind). There’s now the potential for a new kind of verbal dispute. Debates about the virtues and vices of philosophers will seem bizarre. If someone argues that philosophers are unkind, an interlocutor using the redefined term can see that as an absurd contradiction (because for her a philosopher is kind by definition). In the case of “democracy,” it’ll create the following kind of confusion: if you’ve by definition built some good-making features into your stipulative definition of “democracy,” then you’re making opponents of the thing you call “democracy” look like people who don’t like those good things. The worst and most salient violators of the Principle of Neutrality are the many democracy indices that play such a crucial role in public discourse, and also in policymaking. These are in effect large smorgasbords of nice things the editors of those indices like. They shamelessly incorporate heavily normative features into their measures of the thing they call “democracy,” and make no effort to preserve neutrality. As we saw in the previous chapter, these indices have other well-known (fundamental) flaws, but this one is worth highlighting for communicative reasons. The effect of this particular flaw is to make those who are against the thing called “democracy” look like they have deplorable normative views. In doing so, these indices actively degrade rational political discourse.

Taking Stock and Why-Keep-the-Lexical-Item Challenge

I take the points above to be significant considerations against the proliferation of different stipulative definitions of “democracy.” If, despite all that, you’re considering introducing yet another definition of the word “democracy,”

it would be really nice if you gave an argument for why you think that's a good idea. In other words, try to answer the Why-Keep-the-Lexical-Item Challenge: there are so many potential words to choose from, so why do you want to use "democracy"? It's extremely easy to avoid the problems I have been outlining. Christiano could have used "equality-based decision-making" or "EQ decision-making." Schumpeter could have used "Competitive Vote-Based Decision," or "CVB decision-making." The various quantitative measures could just talk about how a country scores on dimensions 1–n. None of these theorists gains anything from their obsession with the word "democracy," and their obsession can do a lot of potential damage.

For some, there may be a natural "who cares?" reaction to all of this: who cares how a theorist uses a few letters in an article? You might think that it's no big deal, and so there is no good reason to be cautious. That's partly true, and partly false: a particular author in a particular paper using a few letters in a certain way isn't a big deal. However, an entire intellectual discipline, dedicated to understanding and assessing the way we make collective decisions, should be at least as cautious and reflective in its terminological choices as the hard sciences. Of course, some might worry that introducing too many new words is just too heavy a cognitive burden on those doing political theory. Maybe political theorists are incapable of learning a few hundred new words. To those with that worry I note, first, that this is not more of a burden than learning hundreds of definitions of the same word. Moreover, political philosophers are a clever bunch: I have faith that they can do it.

PART V
EFFORTS TO DEFEND
“DEMOCRACY”

12

Objections and Replies

In this chapter I try to respond to some of the objections that might have occurred to readers of the previous chapters. Before getting into the back and forth of that, I offer some brief comments on the level of confidence anyone should have about the issues discussed in this book. If you've read this far, you'll have noticed that the arguments rely on ideas and theories from many parts of philosophy, political theory, political science, and contemporary politics. Many, if not all, of those ideas and theories are tentative and controversial. The right view about abolitionism will depend on one's assumptions about the nature of meaning, metasemantics, the semantic-pragmatics distinction, the nature of (and empirical assumptions about) verbal disputes, what speakers want to talk about, what they would want to talk about in counterfactual settings, facts about how speech influences political changes, and facts about the history of the word "democracy," as well as normative assumptions of many kinds. And that's just the beginning of a much longer list. In the light of that, it's prudent to reduce one's level of confidence and not engage in what Nozick described as "coercive philosophy."¹ Note, however, that the caution here goes in both directions: maybe the D-words can be saved, maybe not. However, what is much less uncertain is that we can do better than the D-words: there's easily available terminology that's less problematic. If my arguments have put you on the fence about the D-words, then there's an easily accessible safe haven, and you should head towards it.

With those notes of caution in mind, I shall now articulate and then reply some objections that I think are likely to bother readers, some objections that were raised by perceptive readers, and also objections that have answers that I think help clarify the view presented in the first eleven chapters.

¹ Nozick (1981:1). Nozick imagines that coercive philosophy taken to its extreme requires "arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he *dies*." The arguments in this book are not coercive.

If You're Right, Why Are "Democracy" and "Democratic" Central to Political Debates?

Objection: *If you're right, 'democracy' and 'democratic' are either meaningless or there's massive mismatch, speakers waste their time in verbal disputes, and it's easy for them to do better. Why, then, have these expressions survived? Why are people still using them? How come you are the first one to discover this spectacular fact?*

The practice of using an expression is a social practice that's inherited and passed from one generation to another. Lots of defective social practices survive for a very long time. It should come as no surprise that defective linguistic practices survive. Speakers believe that the words they've inherited are sound. They trust their linguistic community. As a result, they believe or presuppose that the D-words have meaning (or that their meanings align with what they want to talk about). They are wrong about that, just like they are wrong about many other social phenomena. Note that there are lots of people who use terminology many of us consider to be gibberish. For example, Scientologists use lots of terminology that I think is absurd. The same goes for some Continental philosophers.² Such speakers use defective terms with great confidence and without shame. D-users are like that. One point of Chapter 2 was to show that this isn't a particularly surprising conclusion. It happens all the time. The D-users shouldn't feel bad about their mistake—it's an easy one to make.

You might still wonder: why are people so devoted to D-talk? The perseverance of potentially meaningless religious terminology can to some extent be explained sociologically by the power religious institutions have on many people. That power is used to pressure speakers to use terminology that to outsiders seems alien and pointless. When used internally in rituals, speeches, education, and conversations, it reinforces a sense of community and continuity. Political speech is a bit like that. To some extent, D-talk is a piece of a larger political power game. It's used as a kind of mantra (much like religious mantras) to reinforce political power and institutions. Often it is used as a shibboleth to express group membership. This is done by exploiting the lexical effects of the D-words. Think again about Trump saying:

² I have in mind the kind of speech documented in Sokal and Bricmont (1998).

I'm not the one trying to undermine American democracy, I'm the one who's trying to save it. Please remember that.³

The central purpose of this speech act is to engage his followers at an affective level and get them to help him secure political power. While those who disagree with Trump's policies will be inclined to think that *their* use of the D-word is different, it's not. While their political views are more rational, their D-speech serves the same general purpose.

In reply, you might say: *Fine, sometimes these things happen and, for the sake of argument, I'll go along with the idea that the D-words have various kinds of lexical effects. But what is missing here is a systematic theory that predicts the usages of these defective terms.* This objection is based on a correct observation: the appeal to various kinds of lexical effects is not yet systematic and predictive. We would need to know an enormous amount about particular speakers, their audiences, and the context of speech to predict particular lexical effects. We would also need a more extensive terminology for describing these effects. I agree that the lack of these things is a shortcoming, but it's a shortcoming shared with almost all work in social science.

The last part of the objection asks: *How come you are the first one to discover this spectacular fact?* I don't think I am. I think many reflective speakers and thinkers tend to share this view, even though they don't typically articulate it in the way that I've done in this book. Recall, again, the first sentences in Frankfurt's "On Bullshit": "One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this." Even though Frankfurt didn't use "bullshit" in exactly the way I do, the point still applies: I think everyone recognizes that massive amounts of public discourse is, speaking loosely, gibberish, bullshit, nonsense, or some related effort to play on audiences' emotions in order to manipulate them. This book tries to make that kind of loose talk about loose talk more precise, regarding a particular case.

Shouldn't We Use the D-Words, if Doing So Could Have Good Political (and Other) Effects?

Objection: *As you note, the D-words have powerful lexical effects. If those effects can be used for good, shouldn't they? Suppose your worst-case scenario*

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/05/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-convention-speech.html>.

is correct and the D-words are meaningless. The lexical effects remain and can be used by, say, political activists, fundraisers, and populist politicians. You're overemphasizing the value of expressing and communicating thoughts. Lots of speech is just about getting an effect and the D-words certainly do that.

First a concessive reply, then some skepticism. The concessive part is that this book is written from the perspective of someone who values the use of language for the articulation and communication of thoughts. I've very tentatively concluded that we can do better in those respects than the D-words. If your goal is to use language for other purposes, then be my guest.

I'd go further: there's a dark side of the project in this book. It consists of figuring out how to exploit bullshit and empty rhetoric for various purposes (getting money, getting votes, motivating crowds, getting sympathy, manipulation, etc.). This book isn't a contribution to that field, but it doesn't deny that it's doable. In a previous book (Cappelen 2018), I introduced the notion of an exploiter to denote someone using an expression just for its lexical effects. I cautioned against being an exploiter, because even though you'll think that your exploitation is for a good cause, you'll inevitably encounter exploiters with values different from yours. If you and another exploiter are in the business of exploiting the same expression (say "democracy"), you'll easily just end up shouting empty slogans at each other. That's one reason why genuine communication is worth preserving. Exploitation of the kind this response imagines is in effect a slippery slope that leads to a very dark place. Exploiters treat speech as a medium of manipulation, not one for the exchange of thoughts and ideas. They are (as I said in my previous book) anti-intellectualist opportunists who contribute to a destruction of genuine communication.⁴

In the light of this reply, someone might try to steelman the original objection as follows:

Objection refined: *We're often told that the world is suffering from a democratic deficit. You've talked about Orbán and Trump, and the examples could be multiplied. Suppose I grant that we can say everything negative about these*

⁴ An anonymous reader for OUP points out that Teresa Marques (2021), Matthieu Queloz and Friedemann Bieber (2021), and Matthew Shields (2022) argue that speakers care about conceptual disputes for many reasons other than finding the ideal concept for articulating thoughts. For example, if your goal is to win an election, then you may have all kinds of excellent reasons for keeping "democracy" and "democratic" around. This book is in no way incompatible with that. On the contrary, that's a core thesis of the book. Again, if you have no interest in avoiding empty nonsensical speech or verbal disputes, and you want to promote manipulative speech acts, then the D-words can be useful.

people without using the D-words. But surely it's in general useful to have very vague terms that we can use to pick out positions, so you can find your friends. Take Brennan's analogy of football supporters signaling team affiliation. It's useful to have shirts with the name of your team on them. One could view "democracy" as a colored shirt—it helps draw the attention of your team: people who care about free elections, the press, etc. And that enables you to coordinate with them to act against Trump and Orbán. So even if the word is meaningless, it can, perhaps owing to its lexical effects, serve good coordinating purposes. Maybe it's a shibboleth, but shibboleths (on this line) are good; maybe it's for hooligans, but hooligans (on this line) are good.

Reply: I see things differently. The basic situation is this: we find ourselves living with and dependent on people who disagree with us about how our shared lives should be organized. To resolve those disagreements, we need to talk. If the opposing parties primarily emote, blow trumpets, and make T-shirts, we know for sure that there will be no progress, just increased tension. Coordination requires shared thoughts and plans, not similar T-shirts. Those who choose to spend their time trying to change particular policies or large-scale political structures need to think clearly about what they are opposing, what their alternatives are, and how to realize those alternatives. The idea that all that should or could be compressed into a meaningless shibboleth (or slogan or symbol) is incoherent. Of course, if the person raising this objection has in mind the kind of conflict that is violent and non-discursive, then I don't have views to share. This isn't a book about how to fight, but rather one about how to think and talk.

Objection further refined:⁵ *You're missing the larger point of the objections above. The core point is this: there is a marked contrast between the theoretical context occupied by, for example, political philosophers and theorists and the practical context occupied by political actors. The case for abandonment in the theoretical context is compelling. However, your view about practical contexts is naïve. It suggests that you hold a picture of politics where we each dispassionately present the pros and cons of perfectly clearly stated options for mutual reflection. Your view would be more convincing if it was restricted to theoretical context. By not separating the contexts, you increase the risk of*

⁵ This is more or less a direct quote from a comment by Tristram McPherson. An anonymous reader for OUP made a closely related point: "It seems that Cappelen is telling us... that his view isn't really for politicians or for activists or anyone primarily involved in politics (rather than commentary on or theorizing about politics). So are his arguments only for 'theorists and serious professional contributors' then?"

readers (who are likely to be hostile to your thesis from the get-go) finding the things you say about the practical context unconvincing, and thus dismissing the whole argument.

Before replying to this directly, let's take a step back. As Josh Dever and I point out in our book *Bad Language* (Cappelen and Dever 2019), languages are used for all kinds of nefarious purposes. People use language to lie, deceive, hurt, and manipulate. That doesn't mean that, for example, Grice's cooperative principle and his four maxims of conversation were naive. They are models of norms that govern speech and help us understand deviations from that normative baseline.⁶ Analogously, the fact that people often say things that they don't know doesn't show that proponents of the knowledge norms of assertion are naive and unrealistic about the nature of speech acts. Proponents of these norms are not denying that it often makes sense to lie and deceive. Nor are they advocating for the abandonment of lying and deceiving. Related points apply to the defense of abandonment: if uttering meaningless bullshit will make the world a significantly better place, then go for it. Put in an extreme form: if an innocent child will die unless you utter a sentence with the word "democracy" in it, the abolitionist will, of course, fully support your utterance. However, that concession doesn't need to be based on a distinction between theoretical and practical contexts. That's good because I don't think that a sufficiently sharp "practical vs. theoretical" distinction is even available (see remarks on interactive content flow in Chapter 11).

That said—and now I'm repeating points from above—it's not naive to think that, in the political domain, coordination on shared thoughts and plans requires clear thought and speech (about what is being opposed, the alternatives, and strategies for realizing those alternatives.) There is no reason to think that, in general, politics is a domain where meaningless and misleading bullshit is (and, even less, *should be*) particularly useful.

Is It Realistic to Get People to Give Up D-Talk—Isn't It Too Entrenched?

Objection: *Converting the entire world to D-abolitionism isn't going to be easy. It's not a realistic goal. Even in cases where there's almost universal*

⁶ See Cappelen and Dever (2021).

agreement about abolitionism—for example, the N-word—the result hasn’t been universal abandonment. “Ought to be the case” doesn’t imply “will be the case.”

This book is not an argument for the ease of abandonment. Implementation of universal abandonment will be very difficult. That’s a specific instance of the general difficulty of implementing large-scale normative proposals that involve coordination between many people over long periods of time. If I had an easy fix for that problem (i.e., if I knew how to implement large-scale social change), I probably wouldn’t spend most of my time writing philosophy books. However, the good news is that abandonment can be done at an *individual* and *small-group* level. I don’t use the D-word, just like I don’t use the N-word. There are many other words I have abandoned—for example, “intuition.” Remember the transcript from Oscar Wilde’s trial. Despite the prosecutor’s efforts, Wilde was able to stick to his abandonment of “blasphemous.” For those wanting to move beyond individual abandonment, there are many models of successful abandonment projects in relatively large communities. The use of “retard” and “mental retardation” was the norm in psychological and psychiatric writings until fairly recently. The use of “primitive” in social anthropology is now close to abandoned. The best-case scenario is that the D-words gradually get phased out in the way that those expressions were.

“Democracy” Is an Essentially Contested Concept and That Undermines the Case for Abandonment

Objection: *You’ve ignored the fact that “democracy” is the paradigm of what Gallie calls an essentially contested concept. The data you rely on in defense of abandonment is explained by Gallie’s theory. He showed us that essential contestability is a normal and healthy phenomenon—not something to be shunned.*

In 1956, W. B. Gallie presented a paper called “Essentially Contested Concepts” to the Aristotelian Society. Gallie tried to identify a subset of concepts that are ‘essentially contested,’ and one of the paradigms he used was ‘democracy.’ That paper, along with the ideas it develops, has been extremely influential in literature on democracy.⁷ The paper is used as a

⁷ The paper has over 6,500 citations on Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?cites=446802387027655935&as_sdt=2005&sciodt=0,5&hl=en. Some influential recent

kind of comfort blanket: we shouldn't worry about the conflicting definitions or lack of convergence on what democracy is, because it's an essentially contested concept and such concepts will never have clear definitions. We shouldn't aim for convergence, because it's impossible.

This attitude, and the general deference to Gallie's paper, are unfortunate. Gallie's paper was written more than fifty-five years ago and its core ideas are divorced from everything we have learned about language, meaning, and normativity since then. In what follows, I briefly present Gallie's core ideas and then criticize them, both in general and as they are applied to "democracy." The conclusion I draw is that appeals to essential contestability shouldn't comfort anyone and, more specifically, don't undermine (or in any way affect) any of the arguments I rely on in this book.

I'm going to assume that someone interested in this objection will have some familiarity with Gallie's view, but I'll include some core passages from Gallie as a reminder. The basic structure of the view is this:

1. There's an initial characterization of the phenomenon that Gallie wants to identify, namely essential contestability. This is the explanandum.
2. He has a theory about how and why essential contestability occurs. This is the explanans.
3. He has a view about how we can have a certain form of rational discourse involving Essentially Contested Concepts (ECCs).

I'll focus on 1 and 2. The phenomenon that Gallie aims to identify is described in this way:

Essentially contested concepts are "...concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their user." (Gallie 1956: 169)

For example:

"This picture is painted in oils" may be contested on the ground that it is painted in tempera, with the natural assumption that the disputants agree

secondary literature on the topic is Gallie and Hidalgo 2006 and Dryzek 2016. Some interesting work has been done in philosophy of language recently: see Väyrynen (2014) and Evnine (2014). And there's some work at the intersection of philosophy of language and essential contestation: Bosworth and Dowding (ms).

as to the proper use of the terms involved. But “This picture is a work of art” is liable to be contested because of an evident disagreement as to – and the consequent need for philosophical elucidation of – the proper general use of the term “work of art.” (167)

Theorists tend to take this pre-theoretic characterization of the phenomenon at face value, but I don’t think they should. It doesn’t make much sense. Gallie says that he wants to identify “concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their user.” “Art” and “democracy” are alleged paradigms. However, note that most utterances of “Norway is a democracy” or “That decision was democratic” are *never disputed*. They don’t involve endless disputes. That’s the case for almost all utterances of almost all sentences containing “democracy” and “art.” There are infinitely many utterances of the form “That picture is a piece of art” or “They sell art in that gallery” that are not the subject of endless dispute. So if the aim is to identify concepts that satisfy the following condition—*all utterances of sentences containing words that denote that concept are subject to endless disputes*—then the paradigms are not included.

Gallie needs to identify concepts that satisfy some weaker condition. Here are two options that won’t work:

- Some claims containing the word that denotes the concept are subject to a lot of (or endless) disagreement.
- Some of the efforts to define the term that denote the concept are subject to a lot of (or endless) disagreement.

Both of these are too broad: *some* claims about anything can be the subject of a lot of disagreement. For example, many claims about Napoleon and Paris are subject to much disagreement (but that doesn’t make “Paris” or “Napoleon” into ECCs). Similarly, efforts to come up with definitions of terms are typically subject to disputes, because reductive definitions are difficult to get right. Moreover, the restriction to definitions doesn’t fit the kinds of sentences that Gallie appeals to: they are not always efforts to provide definitions (one of Gallie’s examples: “That picture is a piece of art”).

It might seem that I’m being uncharitable. Gallie also says about ECCs that “there are disputes, centered on the concepts which I have just mentioned, which are perfectly genuine: which, although not resolvable by argument of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable

arguments and evidence.” Abstracting from this, maybe he wants to characterize ECC as follows:

- *Some* claims containing the word that denotes the concept are subject to a special kind of disagreement: one (a) that is a genuine disagreement, (b) that is unresolvable by argument, but (c) where nonetheless there is genuine evidence and arguments for both sides.

There are three problems with this version of the view.

- (1) *Very difficult*: Take an utterance of “That’s a work of art” that’s been subject to extensive disagreement. Let’s for the sake of argument say that it satisfies (a) and (c). Even on that assumption, we don’t know that the dispute is *unresolvable*. What we know is that some people have been discussing it for a while without ending up in agreement. That’s not the same as being unresolvable. The failure to reach agreement might happen because they got bored, had other things to do, were non-cooperative conversation partners, or just didn’t care very much. Maybe they need to work harder and not give up so quickly. Some questions are very difficult and it can take a long time—maybe centuries of hard work—to answer. We might be motivated to do that work if we have a clear methodology and a lot is at stake, but that’s not the case for typical instances of “Is that a work of art?” In any particular case, we at best have evidence that we’re faced with *difficult* questions, not that we are faced with *irresolvable* questions.
- (2) *Verbal disputes*: Many disputes are verbal—they arise because the disputants talk past one another. That can happen because they have different beliefs about what the core terminology means. Chalmers (2011), for example, suggests that this explains many disputes that have been going on for a very long time in philosophy: they are verbal, rather than substantive. So even if a dispute has gone on for a long time without being resolved, that doesn’t mean it’s irresolvable (you just need to figure out if the participants are talking past one another). My charitable characterization of ECC above includes clause (a)—that is, that it’s a genuine disagreement. However, Gallie makes no effort to ensure that his paradigm cases are not just pointless verbal disputes. We need an account of the difference between ECC and verbal disputes. One possibility is that all the data is better accounted for as pointless verbal disputes. In earlier chapters I’ve made exactly that case for the D-words.

- (3) *Meaninglessness*: Some disputes go on for a very long time because the terms in question are so defective that they mean nothing. This is another lesson of the arguments presented earlier in this book—speakers can be under the illusion that they are making genuine claims by uttering certain sentences, but they are in fact not. Under such circumstances, no amount of evidence or justification will suffice.

In sum: contrary to popular belief, Gallie doesn't have a well-defined initial phenomenon to give an explanation of. That said, maybe we don't need it. A fan of Gallie's framework might say there is no need to rely on that pre-theoretic characterization. What's important is to understand the five necessary and sufficient conditions that Gallie presents for being an ECC. I turn now to this more theoretical characterization of the alleged phenomenon, and argue that it also fails to pick out any interesting phenomenon. Here are Gallie's five conditions:

- (I) An ECC denotes some kind of valued achievement.
- (II) This achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole.

These first two conditions are specifically applied to “democracy” as follows:

- “The concept of democracy which we are discussing is appraisive; indeed many would urge that during the last one hundred and fifty years it has steadily established itself as the appraisive political concept par excellence.”
- “The concept of democracy which we are discussing is internally complex in such a way that any democratic achievement (or program) admits of a variety of descriptions in which its different aspects are graded in different orders of importance.”

- (III) Any explanation of its worth must therefore include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features; yet prior to experimentation there is nothing absurd or contradictory in any one of a number of possible rival descriptions of its total worth, one such description setting its component parts or features in one order of importance, a second setting them in a second order, and so on. **In fine, the accredited achievement is initially variously describable.** (my emphasis)

- (IV) The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance. For convenience I shall call the concept of any such achievement “open” in character.
- (V) To use an essentially contested concept means to use it against other uses and to recognize that one’s own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses. Still more simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively

These characterizations fall apart from the very beginning. I’ll focus on (i)–(iii).

- **“Democracy” doesn’t clearly denote an achievement:** I’ll focus first on “achievement” and then on “valued” with the next bullet point. Gallie never defines “achievement.” I don’t know how to divide nouns into those that are achievements and those that are not, and Gallie doesn’t tell us. To pick some terms from the political sphere, consider: “garbage collection,” “summer vacation,” and “sortition.” Do these terms denote achievements? The term “democracy” denotes groups that make collective decisions in a certain way, and “democratic” describes that way of making decisions. Imagine a particular decision is about to be made, for example, about who should be the parent representative in a primary school. The parents choose between sortition and voting, and settle on voting. They vote, and then Lucie becomes the parent representative. In what sense is the choice of voting over sortition an achievement? This is just to say that Gallie’s basic terminology is problematic. This is not a minor terminological squabble: remember we’re looking to (i)–(v) to find a characterization of what Gallie is trying to construct a theory of (since the initial pre-theoretic characterization failed to do that). The reliance on the undefined term “achievement” to describe what he’s talking about is a bad start.⁸
- **“Democracy” doesn’t denote something valued—it denotes something that some people value (for some decisions in some settings), and that other people don’t value:** According to Gallie, ECCs denote a

⁸ There’s technical terminology in semantics here, where “achievement” denotes a sort of verb or action type (a completed one). But that can’t be what’s operative here since “democracy” and “art” are not tensed verbs.

valued achievement. I’ve just argued that the category of “achievement” is dubious. I’ll put that concern aside for now and focus on “valued.” The term “democracy” is no more evaluative than “sortition” or “garbage collection.” It’s not a normative term. This is a point I’ve been pushing throughout, but I’ll recap the key points here. There’s nothing intrinsically normative about saying “decision x was made in a democratic way.” If x was a decision made during brain surgery, it would be a form of derision. Note that even lovers of “democracy” don’t think that a decision x being made in a democratic way is a good thing independent of what x is and the context of x. Some people think that it is valuable that some political decisions are made in a democratic way. Others disagree. Those in the Platonic tradition don’t lack linguistic competency. They just don’t think what “democracy” picks out is valuable. They are perfectly competent users of “democracy.”⁹

- **No fixed internal components:** I turn now to the third core idea in Gallie’s explanation of ECC: the idea that an ECC denotes something (a valued achievement) that has *internal complexity*. Here’s what Gallie says:

Are all worthwhile achievements essentially internally complex? That they are seems to me as certain as any statement about values and valuation can be; and although I admit that there is plenty to be said and asked about why this is so, I don’t think it necessary to embark on such discussion here.

Disputants disagree over how to weigh and order those achievements’ internal elements, and that leads to varied descriptions. Above I raised doubts about “achievement” and “valuable.” I turn now to the idea of “internal complexity” that results in what Gallie calls “varied descriptions.” Gallie never tells us how to determine the components of achievements. The question “What does it take to be a component of an achievement?” simply isn’t addressed in the paper. He gives some examples, but doesn’t tell us how he picked them. That alone disqualifies this from being an explanatory account: we can’t assess this proposal unless we’re given an account of how to assess

⁹ Gallie makes a similar, but not identical, point (also made elsewhere in this book) that “democracy” doesn’t always have a positive valence. He does seem to think, though, that it always has *some* valence. But that’s not right. We can easily think of cases where it has no valence—“the orchestra chose what to play democratically, rather than have the conductor choose” conveys neither positive nor negative values.

proposed components. To see how hard that is, consider the following proposals for how to fix components:

The internal components are there by virtue of meaning alone: On this view, we need an account of something like analyticity, and then an account of the meaning of, say, “democracy.” We’ll also need a specification of the components of democracy that follow from its meaning.

The problem with that proposal is that this is exactly what Gallie argues against. There is no agreement on the meaning of “democracy,” and so no agreement on what the components are. There are many suggestions that we’ve seen earlier in this book: everything from Schumpeter’s minimalism to the sixty components of the Economist Intelligence Unit to the thirty-three components in Colledge et al. More generally, this shows that the internal structure that Gallie appeals to can’t be fixed. So Fixed is false:

Fixed: There’s a fixed set of components, and disputants disagree over how to weigh and organize these. Their disagreement is not over the components.¹⁰

If Fixed is false, then Gallie needs some version of Varied:

Varied: Those who engage in a dispute over an ECC don’t agree on the internal components of C and their disagreement stems (at least in part) from a disagreement over what the internal components are.

If Gallie assumes Varied, then a natural explanation of the disagreement he identifies is simply that the speakers talk past one another. There’s no longer any reason to think that there is *one* concept that they share, but disagree over. They simply have different concepts and are engaged in a verbal dispute. Just how to characterize that kind of dispute will be tricky, because Gallie moves freely between talking about concepts and uses, and the disagreement can be described as what Chalmers calls Narrow Verbal Dispute or Broad Verbal Dispute depending on what further assumptions are made.

¹⁰ That this is Gallie’s view is clear from what he says about the various factors in his artificial case. He lists the factors and then adds: “... some importance, however slight, must, in practice, be attached to each of these factors, for all that the supporters of one team will speak of its ‘sheer-speed attack’ (apparently neglecting other factors), while supporters of other teams coin phrases to emphasise other factors in bowling upon which their favoured team concentrates its efforts.” See also his footnote 2.

My conclusion from all of this is that the objection at the beginning fails. A casual reference to Gallie's paper without trying to fix up the details of what he says is useless, because Gallie hasn't identified an explanandum, and even less so an explanans.

Metalinguistic Negotiation to the Rescue

Objection: *You've neglected the crucial phenomenon of metalinguistic negotiation. That can be used to explain a lot of the data that you've appealed to, and it undermines the argument for abandonment.*

Metalinguistic Negotiation Ludlow-Style

There's an affinity between some of Gallie's discussion and the more recent discussion of metalinguistic negotiation found in Barker (2002), Ludlow (2014), and then Plunkett and Sundell (2013). Appeals to metalinguistic negotiation come in many varieties. One early source is Peter Ludlow's work on the dynamic lexicon.¹¹ Ludlow follows Chomsky in denying that there are natural languages. So English and French don't exist, and play no explanatory role. Expressions such as "garbage," "summer," and "democracy" have no standing meaning. Meaning is something that's created in context as the result of a negotiation between speakers and audiences. On this view, speakers create meaning "on the fly."

Fully engaging with Ludlow's picture would involve a full-scale defense of the idea that there is such a thing as English and French, and that words have meanings in natural languages. That would be a separate book, and so I'm going to simply mark that this is a view I don't take myself to have refuted here. However, note that if you're an advocate of that view, you agree with the central thesis in this book: "democracy" and "democratic" don't have meanings in English. You'll agree with this, not because of my arguments, but because no words have such meanings. Then you need to show that speakers are capable of fixing meanings for 'democracy' and 'democratic' in contexts as the result of negotiations between speaker and audience.

¹¹ Ludlow (2014) and especially the references therein.

You would have to fix KQIE values in context. That strikes me as implausible, unless there's a precedent of earlier such fixings.

There are general worries about Ludlow's dynamic lexicon that are particularly pressing in connection with political discourse. Note that even if it's true that speakers somehow manage to fix KQIE values, there are now spectacular amounts of verbal disputes. Speakers constantly make up new meanings for the D-words. They vary in content from one conversation to another. If in C1, someone says "HKU's philosophy department is a democracy," that can be true if they have negotiated a Christiano-style definition. If in another context, someone says "HKU's philosophy department is not a democracy," we shall need to ensure that the negotiations ended up with the same meanings in order to have confidence that the two speakers disagree. Not only is that extremely difficult (I would say impossible), but it also brings out how implausible it is that the participants would be able to fix an intension without an explicit discussion, just by talking without quotation marks, and with no prior-stable meaning. How, for example, can we see Biden's and Trump's respective utterances as having been given any meaning through negotiation between speaker and audience in the following:

BIDEN: It is clear, absolutely clear... this is a battle between the utility of democracies in the twenty-first century and autocracies... That's what's at stake here. We've got to prove democracy works.

TRUMP: I'm not the one trying to undermine American democracy, I'm the one who's trying to save it. Please remember that.

There's no sense in which they are engaging with an audience and as a result fixing on a joint meaning in a context. There's no fixed audience, no fixed context, and no sense that these speakers are part of a conversation.¹² So how are they, according to Ludlow, talking about the same thing?

Before moving on from this very inconclusive discussion of the dynamic lexicon, I want to note a way in which that view can be friendly to abolitionism, and more specifically to the view in this book:

Ludlow's dynamic lexicon in defense of abolitionism: If we're negotiating meanings on the fly, then surely these negotiations can fail. If they fail, some of the words uttered in a particular context fail to get a meaning. Call these contexts the No-Meaning Contexts. This opens up the possibility that some

¹² These are concerns that the proponents of the dynamic lexicon are aware of, and I'm raising them here to highlight some problematic aspects of the view, not as a conclusive refutation.

terms tend to generate No-Meaning Contexts. This could happen for many reasons: their history, lexical effects, conflicting background assumptions, or something else. If that's the case, and if there's a way to do better, then we have an internal-to-the-dynamic-lexical-framework argument for abolitionism. In sum: the framework isn't entirely unfriendly to the ideas in this book. Ludlow's focus hasn't been on such defective contexts, but it's worth exploring how his view can give an account of bullshit, gibberish, and nonsense.

Metalinguistic Negotiation Plunkett-and-Sundell-Style

In Plunkett and Sundell (2013) we find a less radical version of the view. Their view doesn't assume that there are no stable meanings, and it doesn't assume the primacy of micro-languages. It's supposed to bypass the meta-physics of meaning that Ludlow relies on. So on this view, a term, say, "torture," has a stable meaning in English, and then, if the theory is correct, there are some disputes that are best characterized as debates over what meaning that expression should have.¹³

Note that this view isn't at all directed at anything I say in this book. The entire setup assumes that there's a stable meaning, and then the theory is about how negotiations can arise and what they explain. The central claims in this book are that the stable meaning of "democracy" is either absent or a massive mismatch, the expression generates verbal disputes, and we can do better. None of that is undermined by the possibility that, in some cases, we renegotiate meanings of an expression in context.

Suppose we put that distinction aside and just focus on the general idea that, in a particular setting, some speech participants are engaging in metalinguistic discourse, even if they are not aware that they are. This would be compatible with more or less everything I've said in this book: the word has no meaning (or is massively mismatched). So in a particular context, speakers negotiate over a new meaning for the meaningless (or mismatched) term. Two interesting options occur at that point:

- (i) It turns out that some expressions, for example, "democracy" and "democratic," are so defective and confusing (because of their lexical effects, their histories, and the way they are exploited in the linguistic community) that they can't be fixed in the kind of tacit conversational

¹³ There are many aspects of this view that I disagree with and find underdeveloped, but I shall put that aside here. For more on the view, see Cappelen (2018: ch. 15).

negotiation that Plunkett and Sundell imagine. Their defectiveness infects the negotiation and the process fails.

- (ii) Alternatively, the speakers might recognize the hopelessness of fixing “democracy” and “democratic” (and no doubt many other expressions), and then instead insist on abandonment and replacement. The conversation between Oscar Wilde and the prosecutor (quoted in Chapter 1) provides an illustration of this idea.

Finally, note that no matter which version of the negotiation picture you go in for, there’s a deep affinity between these views and abolitionism.¹⁴ Linguistic negotiation over, say, “torture” will typically take the form of the parties articulating in “torture”-free terminology what they care about when they use that expression. The participants are, in effect, engaged in abolitionist discourse; that is, discourse that’s free of “torture.” They do that to articulate the meaning they want “torture” to have, but it could, of course, happen that this “torture”-free discourse resolves all their disagreements. Often they might end up agreeing to simply continue their conversation in the “torture”-free vocabulary and leave their disagreement over “torture” aside.

“Democracy” Is a Family Resemblance Concept and That Undermines the Arguments for Abandonment

Objection: *In the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein says:*

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! (§66)

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: “games” form a family... And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre.

¹⁴ Thanks to David Plunkett for discussion here.

And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. (§67)

Throughout, you've been making exactly the mistake that Wittgenstein warns against: you've been looking for something all things called "democracies" have in common and all decisions called "democratic" have in common. Failing to find that, you've concluded that these words have no meaning. You reach that conclusion only if you ignore the truth about family resemblance that Wittgenstein revealed to us seventy years ago. How could you have over-looked that?

I have not talked about "family resemblance" (despite often finding political scientists, who don't know much about the philosophical background theory, appealing to it). I haven't talked about that because it's not a real theory. Everything resembles everything else in some respect. 1.00001 is very similar to 1, but "1.00001" refers to a different number from "1." A female rose-breasted grosbeak is extremely similar to a female purple finch (look up the pictures), but the expressions don't denote the same bird. Good fake dollar bills are indiscernible from real dollar bills, but they are not in the extension of "dollar bill." The whole metaphor of family resemblance was a bad idea from the beginning, because real families are not relevantly similar: they contain adopted children, have children from multiple marriages and partnerships, have distant cousins, etc. More generally, talk of family resemblance isn't even the beginning of a theory with any kind of explanatory or predictive power.

There could be a theory of the form: something is in the extension of "D" just in case it is similar to item X in respect R1 or R2 or ... Rn. But that's not the proposal, because that's just another set of (disjunctive) necessary and sufficient conditions: the challenge for the metasemantics would be to determine R1 ... Rn. The abolitionist argues that either this process has failed (that's the no-meaning hypothesis), or it overgenerates or undergenerates, and we can do better.

Overgeneration Revisited: What about "Justice," "Freedom," "Power," and "Love"? Is There Anything That Shouldn't Be Abandoned?

The most common reaction to the arguments in this book is a concern that they overgenerate. Readers have the impression that I presuppose a standard of linguistic perfection that's either impossible or absurdly unrealistic.

If we were to take these standards seriously, we would have to give up large swaths of language and it's unclear what (if anything) would remain. To pick just a few examples, wouldn't we be forced to give up "justice," "freedom," "power," and "love"? Is the ultimate aim a complete rebooting of human language and communication?

Reply: In what follows I'll be rearticulating points from Chapter 4, but it's worth revisiting these issues now that the complete argumentative structure has been laid out. The arguments I have presented most definitely do **not** presuppose impossibly high linguistic standards and are **provably realistic**. My anti-'democracy' arguments have two parts:

- a) I show that the D-words have various deep semantic, pragmatic, and communicative defects.
- b) I show that it's easy to do better. It's easy to do better because speakers regularly do better. Speakers frequently start discourse using the D-words and then go on to explain what they really have in mind (using D-purged vocabulary.) It's not particularly hard.

Neither (a) nor (b) presupposes standards that are impossible to live up to. They don't really presuppose standards at all. I'll give two illustrations of what I have in mind here. First, consider the various influential democracy indices (such as those produced, e.g., by the Economist Intelligence Unit). The structure of these indices is simple (even though it raises many foundational questions, which I discuss in Chapter 7): pick a bunch of features, say F1–F60. Grade countries along these features. Aggregate the grades assigned to F1–F60, and the result is a degree of democracy for that particular country. I've argued that aggregating these features and then claiming that they add up to a "a degree of democracy" is borderline absurd, but even if you disagree with me on that point, it's indisputable that these authors claim to have found ways of talking that capture important aspects of what people have in mind when they use the D-words. That's the point of the F1–F60 features. These are D-purged ways of talking that are supposed to capture what people take themselves to talk about when they use the D-words. Even if, like me, you reject the claim that F1–F60 add up to "a degree of democracy," you can think that it's a great idea to talk about F1–F60, their interconnections, and to try to empirically explore the (degree of) presence or absence of these features in various political structures. The key point in the current context is that talking about F1–F60 isn't impossibly hard, and it doesn't presuppose absurdly high standards (there are no presupposed standards at all—you just talk about F1–F60).

For a second example of how easy it is to do better, consider again the Texas GOP Voting Bill, which is often criticized as a threat to American democracy.¹⁵ Again, it's easy to purge this debate of the D-words. For example, when pushed about what's wrong with the Voting Bill in Texas, two issues that keep coming up are restrictions on mail-in voting and the opening hours of voting booths. Those things are easy to talk about without D-words. They (and a ton of related issues) are also what the real debate is (or should be) about (not some illusive and disputed phenomenon picked out by the D-words).

I'm now in a position to answer the overgeneration objection: what about all of the other wonderful expressions we care so much about, for example, "justice," "freedom," "power," and "love"? Should we abandon those too? The simple reply to this is that if you can show that these expressions have deep semantic, pragmatic, and communicative defects, **and** that it's easy to do better, then why wouldn't you? Suppose you had convincing arguments that, say, "power" was semantically defective, was a persistent source of communicative problems **AND** that it's easy to do better using terminology T. Then it's your intellectual responsibility to advocate for the abandonment of "power" and the expansion of T-talk. That said, I don't know that "power" or "love" are deeply semantically, pragmatically, and communicatively defective. The details matter, so there's now a large and interesting research project within the field of abandonment studies: find out if "power," "love," etc. are deeply defective and whether it's easy to do better. These are promising topics to work on. For all I know, it might turn out that large swaths of language can be relatively easily improved. I suspect that's true. That discovery would not only be intellectually fascinating but also have massive practical implications. If it might be true that large swaths of our conceptual frameworks are in need of radical overhaul, the Theory of Abandonment deserves a significant amount of intellectual investment. From that point of view, this book is but the beginning of a larger project that should be of interest even if I've failed to convince you that the D-words should be abandoned.

¹⁵ Recall: "Democratic senators have been unable to move voting and election bills that would address what many of them call a **fundamental attack on American democracy** that could lock in a new era of Republican minority rule"; *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/12/us/republicans-voting-rights-democrats.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>.

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Note: “democracy” refers to the word, democracy (no quotation marks) to the governmental system.

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