Ambiguity and Vagueness in Political Concepts:

On Coding and Referential Vacuity

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Abstract

We introduce the distinction between ambiguity and vagueness. We argue that sometimes conceptual dispute in political philosophy can be due to ambiguity. However, that is relatively easy to solve by disambiguation and the subscript gambit. Doing so can reveal any underlying substantive disagreement. We then argue that many political concepts are vague. We introduce two types of vagueness. For the first type, vague terms can be precisified by what we call coding decisions. Again, this can involve a version of the subscript gambit. When precisifying by coding decisions we can find several, different but equally valid versions of the same vague concept. However, those coding decisions are often trivial and so judgements about, say, the relative freedom of individuals or societies would not be affected much by those coding decisions. This is semantic vagueness. The second notion of vagueness is more problematic. Here vague terms are incoherent in the sense that they involve normative judgements or desiderata or we have moral intuitions about what the term entails and these cannot all be satisfied under all conditions. Here the term is referential vacuous. There is ontic vagueness. Here too the term can be precisified in different but equally valid versions of the vague concept. However, none can be defended as being the best representation of the vague concept and so must be judged on other criteria. We point out that despite incoherence and referential vacuity, there are still advantages in terms of efficiency and rhetorical value in using vague terms in moral and political theory.
One form of philosophical activity feels like pushing and shoving those things to fit into some fixed perimeter of specified shape. You push and shove the material into the rigid area getting it into the boundary on one side, and it bulges out on another. You run around and press in the protruding bulge, producing yet another in another place. So you push and shove and clip off corners from the things so they’ll fit and you press in until finally almost everything sits unstably more or less in there; what doesn’t gets heaved far away so that it won’t be noticed …Quickly, you find an angle from which it looks like as exact fit and take a snapshot; at a fast shutter speed before something else bulges out too noticeably. Then, back to the darkroom to touch up the rents, rips and tears in the fabric of perimeter. All that remains is to published the photograph as a representation of exactly how things are, and to note how nothing fits properly into any other shape. (Nozick 1974, p. xiii)

Introduction

Robert Nozick’s satire of conceptual analysis hits home a little too uncomfortably for many analytic philosophers. Conceptual analysis, whether it be done for its own sake, or more usually as part of a larger argument about social justice or the organization of society often does seem to resemble his parody. The dominant mode of conceptual analysis in modern analytic theory is to try to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct application of a term. This occurs not only during the rather old-fashioned conceptual analysis along the lines of ‘what is freedom?’ but also as concepts are used to build up theories of social justice or permissibility or feasibility. Writers provide a definition and through examples and inference suggest that it
clarifies the subject better than earlier rival definitions. Previous conceptualizations are critiqued through examples that are designed to promote the author’s preferred conceptualization. Sometimes inferences are derived from definitions that provide logical inconsistencies, more usually they provide examples from are sometimes called ‘the method of cases’ (Mizrahu 2014; Baz 2016) or intuition pumps (Dennett 2013) that are compellingly intuitive. In order to defend a theory and the concepts derived therein requires complex reasoning and defence. Along with Nozick’s satire of pushing and pulling we also see writers dodging and weaving to avoid the sniper fire and landmines set by their critics.

We might begin by querying why we think terms in our moral language can be specified by necessary and sufficient conditions for their correct application. To be sure it is difficult not to attempt to give such conditions when defining a word but why should we believe our natural moral language can be logically closed and our moral inferences axiomatically of deductively proved? Our moral and political language might still be developing, might always be developing. If our morality changes as it develops then so will its basic concepts. The method of cases, whether it is designed to utilize our semantic or our moral intuitions, might only show how our morality and moral language change over time. Indeed, the method of cases might help that morality to change. They might be involved in conceptual change as much as conceptual sharpening.

Leaving that conjecture aside we argue in this paper that the unsatisfactory nature of conceptual analysis in moral and political theory is a fundamental feature of the nature of the subject. Outside of any developmental account of our moral and political concepts such terms are ambiguous and vague. We can, we shall argue, try to overcome ambiguity, though even here, with moral concepts overcoming
ambiguity does not always neatly solve political disputation. The harder problem is the vagueness of many of our moral and political concepts. We shall argue that attempting to precisify such concepts tends to demonstrate fundamental incoherence that ought to lead to the elimination of those concepts in favour of their essential elements. Such elimination will not resolve dispute though it ought to bring into clearer focus wherein the normative dispute lies. However, we cannot expect to eliminate our fundamental moral and political concepts, such as ‘freedom’, ‘toleration’, ‘the state’ or ‘democracy’ in favour of their core elements. These terms are part of our moral language. Vague concepts are not necessarily bad ones, but make for efficiency in natural discourse. Vague concepts are bad for scientific discourse, and therein lies the fundamental problem of analytic political philosophy. We can think of analytic moral and political philosophy as a scientific effort to make vague concepts precise in order to make precise our theories of how the world should be. However, if the moral world is not precise then our basic moral concepts cannot be so. If we bring too much precision then we might end departing from our moral world. We might define a coherent and consistent account of ‘freedom’ is completely material terms, that does not match up with the ideas of freedom for which people give up their lives (Dowding and van Hees 2007). Whilst analysing neural states during action does not describe that action in a morally relevant way. In an important sense, scientific and natural language are two different sorts of thing. The danger of too much precision and coherence in analytic philosophy is that it might depart from our morality, which might not be completely precise and coherent. The danger is that professional political theory must either become discourse unto itself, or must remain vague in order to converse with the folk.
Wilfred Sellars (1963) makes a distinction between the manifest and the scientific image that might be helpful here. Sellars’ topic was the personal knowledge we have of ourselves. He believes there are two images of man, the scientific that describes through concepts such as genes and neurons and through the methods of biochemistry and the like; and the manifest image as we encounter ourselves in a language describing feelings and our natural perception. Sellars thought the two images of the world and of ourselves are equally important. The problem for moral and political philosophy, as opposed to moral psychology and political science, is that its topic is in the manifest image. It is about how we want the world to be as we naturally see it and not necessarily about how the world is. And that world is not just the non-human non-moral world. Some of our morality rests on culture, and that culture might depend upon norms and conventions that can be understood in the scientific image of equilibriums and best-response strategies.

**Ambiguity**

It is usually thought that we can easily distinguish ambiguity and vagueness and only the latter is philosophically interesting though many terms are both ambiguous and vague (Sorenson 2016). The term ‘child’ is ambiguous as it can refer to any offspring of an adult or it can be used to refer only to immature offspring. When we disambiguate these two uses of the term ‘child’ we overcome what might be otherwise be simple verbal confusion. We can see how such disambiguation can operate with the terms of political discourse. We can see how we might disambiguate a simple confusion of two rather different uses of the word freedom. One person might be using the word freedom to mean ‘political freedom’ that is, the rights and privileges that legitimately come from a set of institutions that makes for a politically free society.
Another person might use the word freedom to mean ‘metaphysical freedom’ that is, the conditions under which a person might be said to enjoy free will and be free in a metaphysical sense. Of course, there has been a great deal of debate in the pages of philosophical journals about whether freedom really means a form metaphysical freedom or whether political freedom is enough for us to strive for in our society. We do not wish, in any regard, to derogate such debate. However, it should not be necessary to engage in conceptual dispute over the term ‘freedom’ in that debate. We can label the two forms of freedom ‘political freedom’ and ‘metaphysical freedom’; discuss the most appropriate specifications of each term; and also dispute whether or not in our society we should strive only for political freedom; only for metaphysical freedom; or for both; or perhaps some combination of both. By disambiguating we can at least avoid ‘merely verbal dispute’ and concentrate upon the real issue, that is, what sort of institutions do we want to promote what sort of people and society. David Chalmers (2011) labels such disambiguation the ‘subscript gambit’ whilst Dowding and van Hees (2007) call it the methodological criterion of conceptual analysis. The idea is that the reference of each of the disambiguated phrases is obviously different, and once we are clear about the different referent of diverse uses of the same word, we can bring into sharper focus what is important in the philosophical dispute.

We might try the same tactic for more direct disputes about the concept of freedom. For example, the dispute between negative libertarians represented by a writer such as Ian Carter (1999; 2008; 2011), and republican libertarians represented by an author such as Phillip Pettit (1997; 2001; 2014), might be subjected to the subscript gambit. Negative libertarians believe that freedom means freedom from interference. Roughly speaking, by Carter’s account, (and following the lead of Hillel Steiner (1994)) the amount of freedom that a person enjoys is given by the jointly
compossible set of actions she can do given the set of actions that she cannot do because she would be stopped by others. Republicans believe that freedom is best seen as freedom from domination: merely being free from interference to do some action \( A \), does make one free to do \( A \). Equally, being unable to do some action because one is stopped by some set of other people does not necessarily make one unfree. If the action is stopped by the non-arbitrary legitimate actions of another person then one has not lost a freedom. We could view this dispute over the term ‘freedom’ as one that can be handled by disambiguation. We could say there are two concepts of freedom in operation here.\(^1\) One Freedom\(^{\text{N}}\) is freedom from interference; the other Freedom\(^{\text{R}}\) is freedom from domination. These diverse conceptions are simply different ways of partitioning states of the world. The two partitions overlap but diverge at important junctures over whether a given state constitutes an example of individual freedom. We need have no conceptual dispute here, we simply see that by one partition an individual agent at place and time \( T \) is Free\(^{\text{N}}\) but by another partition that individual agent is not Free\(^{\text{R}}\).

Such disambiguation does not, of course, end dispute between Ian Carter and Philip Pettit, or between negative libertarians and republicans more generally. They each might have very different preferred ways of organizing society. The negative libertarians might produce one set of desiderata for the institutions of society; the

\(^{1}\) A familiar Rawlsian account suggests that there are various conceptions of a core concept. As we make clear below, we see this distinction as a vague concept that can be made precise in different and rival ways, rival because they imply different referents. However, we do not adopt the language of concepts and conceptions, rather we talk about vague and precise concepts. There are levels of precision and all we need to do is adopt the level that is precise enough for to answer the question we are pondering. Hence, we tend to use the terms ‘concept’ and ‘conception’ interchangeably. We see concepts as partitioning states of the world, and to the extent that there are several rival partitions that represent one master partition, that master partition must be vague and as such – as we argue below – has no precise referent.
republicans a different set of desiderata. And each side might defend their desiderata on the grounds that these, and only these, desiderata maximize liberty. For example, Pettit (2006) uses republican freedom to critique the idea of freedom in the market. But the first set maximizes freedom\textsubscript{N} and the second set maximizes freedom\textsubscript{R}. It is true that each might defend their concept of freedom based on the grounds that what is important and valuable to people are those elements that go into their preferred conception of freedom. So, for the negative libertarians what is important for society is reducing the degree of interference; for the republicans, it is reducing domination. However, we do not need to define liberty in terms of non-interference in order to justify non-interference. Rather we can develop arguments that what is valuable in a society is non-interference. Generally, such arguments would run along the lines of suggesting that people gain value from being able to live their lives without interference from others. This enables the expansion of the scope of individual choice and that enhances people as choosers, increases their autonomy and so on. By maximizing non-interference, we maximize that value. (And that value we call freedom\textsubscript{N}.) Similarly, we do not need to define liberty as non-domination in order to defend the idea that what is valuable in society is trying to minimize domination. Generally, such arguments would run along the lines of suggesting that people gain value from being able to live their lives without others dominating them. Expanding the scope of their non-dominated choices enhances themselves as choosers, increases their autonomy and so on. By maximizing non-domination, we maximize that value. (And that value we call freedom\textsubscript{R}.) Terms can be eliminated in favour of what they are taken to mean (Chalmer 2011; Bosworth 2016), though for efficiency we might want to keep those words in the language suitably disambiguated.
By disambiguation or the subscript strategy, we avoid merely verbal dispute over what the term ‘freedom’ really means and get to the heart of any dispute between negative libertarians and republicans. We can see, in our simple reproduction of their positions, that what really lies at the heart of the dispute is whether what is valuable is being able to do what people choose to do without interference or whether domination, as republicans define that term, provides the decisive consideration. Indeed to some extent the work of Pettit in this area can be seen in precisely that regard. His work on freedom grows out of a belief that merely enhancing the scope of possible actions in a society is not enough when we have a society full of inequalities that mean that some have to be wary of what their more powerful employers, spouses or neighbours think. If some only feel able to act in some manner because they others do not disapprove of those actions then something importantly valuable is lost.

Of course, the dispute between Carter and Pettit is far more complex than this vignette allows. Carter for one would argue that his conception of freedom, in its measurement aspects, effectively does reduce domination because freedom is maximized through the set of compossible actions, and this set of compossible actions includes the range of counterfactual situations where the dominated take into account the disposition of the dominant when choosing to act. In other words, Carter might dispute wherein lies the precise boundary of the partition of his conception of freedom in relation to where Pettit believes it lies. That boundary dispute is a conceptual dispute over freedom. In other words, with regard to that aspect of freedom Carter might argue that the extension of his account of maximal freedom coincides with Pettit. Similarly, we might have similar conceptual disputes over the precise boundaries of freedom. So, there is some conceptual dispute involved in the debate, but that conceptual dispute is over the precise entailments of, respectively, freedom.
and freedom$_R$ rather than which conception of freedom best represents the master unsubscripted concept of freedom. Furthermore, that conceptual analysis does get mixed up with the important dispute over how society should be organized. Nevertheless, disambiguation and the subscript gambit ought to concentrate our attention upon the important issues.

Disambiguation in this manner should lead to the elimination of the disputed term in political argument (Bosworth 2016). We do not need to discuss what freedom really means even if we all agree that freedom is to be maximised, because what is at issue is whether non-interference or non-domination is to be maximised. We can discuss that dispute without using the term freedom at all. That is not to say that it cannot be argued that one way of partitioning the moral universe is superior to another. It might be in fact the case that Pettit and Carter really do not disagree about the ideal organization of society at all. What they disagree about is how to describe and justify that ideal organization. In that case, the theoretical dispute might involve which description and justification is superior. Pettit might argue that the notion of non-domination is normatively stronger, it has greater appeal, and it was really matters to people. Carter might respond that non-interference is really what people want, and its less moralized definition is philosophically superior.

When discussing the worth of different concepts within moral systems, criteria such as parsimony, rhetorical advantage or simply fit with ordinary language or historical precedent might (and are) used to defend one conception over another. We might find that one partition enables us to more easily and efficiently describe the moral universe. Or we might find that one partition elides important distinctions that the other allows. In more a complex manner, we might find that our different partitions over one term, freedom, meld into the different partitions we make over
other terms such as ‘power’, ‘rights’, ‘claims’, ‘privileges’ or even ‘equality’. For example, some negative libertarians argue that maximizing liberty requires equalizing liberty (Steiner 1981), and hence the types of domination that concern Pettit, will largely disappear with that equalization. Again however, we can avoid conceptual dispute through disambiguation and the subscript strategy and translate from one complex philosophical account to another.

In fact, we will assert that whilst there are some undoubted differences between the accounts of the just society between Carter and Pettit, or between negative libertarians and republican more generally, those differences are not nearly so large as dispute over the concept of what freedom really means might suggest. Indeed, the differences between different negative libertarians is probably larger than that between left-libertarians such as Carter and Steiner, and Pettit; and the same might be said about the divergences amongst republicans too. Holding on to one or another concept of liberty does not commit one to a specific account of the liberal or republican society. That suggests that the verbal dispute is strictly irrelevant to the conclusions drawn.

We have argued in this section that some general disputes over concepts, specifically the concept of liberty (though we claim that this can be generalized to many other concepts in political philosophy), can be overcome with disambiguation or the subscript gambit. We make no claim that such disambiguation ‘clears up’ dispute or will lead to a resolution between contending parties. Disambiguation will clear up conceptual confusion but thereby allow us to see more clearly wherein the deep dispute lies. We also make no claim that disambiguation provides a nice clean strategy and will resolve conceptual dispute. Issues between contending parties over the concept of freedom are more complex than our simple account here implies, and
dispute is caught up in rhetorical considerations. Freedom or liberty is (almost) undisputedly valuable, and if one side can promote its conception of liberty over the other then it might make the deference of their preferred way of organizing society easier. In other words we do not discount the importance of rhetorical advantage in political argument. Rather our point is that despite these complications, the ambiguity of concepts in moral and political philosophy is relatively easy to overcome. Relatively easy, that is, in relation to the vagueness that haunts political concepts. If ambiguity were the only issue with regard to political concepts, then, despite all the problems, we might be sanguine about the process of conceptual analysis. However, we shall now argue that political concepts are also vague, and that is much deeper problem.

**Vagueness**

Vague as opposed to ambiguous terms are thought to be more philosophically interesting. The problem of vagueness occurs when it is not clear whether a term correctly applies to some cases. The examples generally used to illustrate the problem are simple concepts where it is difficult or impossible to precisely specify the borderline for the correct application of certain cases. ‘Tallness’ is a vague term, but one which is fit for purpose in natural language. Saying ‘George is the tall guy over by the window’ is more helpful than saying ‘George is the guy by the window who 178.57cm tall’. That latter, far more precise answer is as likely to confuse as much as help. Indeed, as we see from some examples below, sometimes vague descriptions are more accurate than precise ones.

The philosophical problem arises, because without being able to specify precise boundaries for vague terms Sorites paradoxes can be constructed (Sorenson 2016). Whilst vague terms create metaphysical and logical problems for philosophers,
they are of no concern to science. We give two versions of vague concepts. The first follows the standard account of vague concepts such as tallness where the vagueness lies at the boundary. We argue science handles such vague terms by eliminating using more precise concepts, and they only return to give a summary of the findings where the vagueness can be accurate than the precision of the findings. Or, they are handled in a similar fashion to ambiguous concepts, where more precise versions are created by what we call coding decisions. The different coding decisions will lead to different precisifications, none of which can claim to be the correct one. Generally, at the margin, different coding decisions will make only trivial differences to analysis, and where they do not they open inquiry into why those marginal decisions turn out to be important. This does not necessarily mean that one coding decision is superior to another over all, but might be for certain research questions.

The second account of vagueness is more problematic. Again, different precisifications can be given for the same vague concepts and again none can be defended as the best precisification. However, in this form of vagueness, considering measurement issues, it turns out that the concept itself, based upon normative considerations (intuitions) is incoherent and the term referentially vacuous. Those normative considerations cannot all be simultaneously satisfied in all conditions. The precisifications can be defended, but none can be claim to be superior representations of the vague concept. We shall argue that despite being incoherent such a concept still has a normative role to play as a vague concept.

The first account of vagueness can be considered semantic indeterminacy. The world is precise but we use vague term for efficiency, however at times we need to partition the world into more precise categories for scientific analysis. On the second account, there is ontic vagueness. We have contrary desiderata leading to an
incoherent concept, that can be precisified but here the world is not simply partitioned
in ways that are only trivially different through semantic coding decisions, but is
importantly different since these partitions given certain normative criteria
precedence. Even so, there might still be efficiency reasons for utilizing the vague
term.

**Coding Decisions and Elimination**

Some people argue that for any concept there must be a single precisification. For
them the fact the world is not vague and only our representation of it is vague means
there is only epistemic vagueness (Williamson 1994). Epistemicists in this regard
suggest that for all vague terms such as ‘tallness’ or ‘richness’ there must be some
precise division in height or relative wealth where someone moves from being tall to
not-tall, or from being rich to not-rich. It is just that, epistemically, we do not and
argues that a belief constitutes knowledge when it is appropriately reliable and so the
same beliefs must be expressed in sufficiently similar cases. He then claims that the
extension of vague predicates supervenes on their use in such a manner that small
changes in the use of a given term must induce a small change in that terms extension.
However, we cannot detect such small changes (Williamson 1994, p. 231, 1997, p.
948). The fact that we have some descriptions, some concepts that are not precise,
does not mean that our knowledge is limited, just the manner in which we have
chosen to describe the world. It is true that imprecise language causes problems when
that language is analysed using the tools of classical logic. One response is to analyse
natural or folk language by giving up truth bivalence either through fuzzy logic
(Machina 1976) or by supervaluation (Eddington 1997; Keefe 2000) suggesting there
just is no sharp dividing line for cases such as tallness, baldness or wealth, and the
correct application of the term allows for borderline cases. Another is to save classical
logic by a single preciisification, but that seem only to constitute a metaphysical
division by a coding decision not by nature.

There do seem to be some precise divisions by nature. In part, how precise we
need to be in any scientific analysis depends upon the research question. The world
might be precisely described at different levels of granularity. Precision matters at
some level for some questions. For example, the term gold can be given precise
meaning, it is an element with atomic number 79. It might have been used less
precisely at some times to mean yellowish soft metal, whilst gold in gold rings, bullion
and so on there are impurities and the degree of the purity of gold is measured in by
carat. As Williamson (1994: 231) points out

For any difference in meaning, there is a difference in use. The converse does
not always hold. The meaning of a word may be stabilized by natural
divisions, so that a small difference in use would make no difference in
meaning. A slightly increased propensity to mistake fool’s gold for gold would
not change the meaning or extension of the word “gold”.

The reason is that the natural way to partition part of the empirical world is in terms
of elements which we now realize are defined in terms of atomic number (and certain
structural characteristics). There are some natural divisions and if our language does
not map those natural divisions then in an important sense it is misleading description
of the world. These divisions enable us to make predictions about how the world
presents itself under different conditions. However, the sharp divisions we see in the
chemical world do not always provide a good model for other partitions that we make
for predictive and explanatory purposes.
We can see how science actually handles a vague concept like tallness. There are scientific analyses that examine claims that tall men gain advantage in the workplace in terms of salary and promotion, and tall candidates have advantages over smaller ones in elections. For example, height has been correlated with various social and economic attributes with taller businessmen tending to receive more frequent promotion (Melamed and Bozionelos 1992), higher starting salaries (Loh 1993) and claims that taller candidates tend to be more successful than shorter ones in US Presidential elections (Stulp et al 2013). None of these analyses uses any distinctions between what constitutes being tall. They do not code candidates into categories ‘tall’ and ‘non-tall’. Rather they compare the heights of candidates and then conduct forms of regression analysis using height along with many other variables to reach the conclusion that taller candidates, on average, tend to do better. In other words when doing science vague concepts drop out, even if they are then brought back in (undefined and so used vaguely) when reporting their results. These reports give people the general idea of the findings rather than the precise findings themselves. Once the precise analysis is conducted only then are the results more vaguely described re-introducing the concept of tallness. Indeed, given that much of social science is, or at least has been, conducted on samples, the less precise conclusions are more accurate than the precise findings. The precise findings are estimates which give credence to the vaguer conclusions rather than complete credence to the precision of the results themselves.

In other words, we do not have to precisify vague concepts in order to provide precision in our descriptions and analyses of the world. We simply eliminate the vague concepts in terms of more precise ones. That elimination does not mean the term is eliminated permanently from our language, its utility as a vague term remains. We
can precisify it if we wish, indeed social science often turns qualitative data into quantitative form in order to conduct empirical analysis. For example, the Comparative Agendas Project, following the lead of the original Policy Agendas Project (John 2006; Dowding et al. 2016) codes public policy issues into 22 major codes and around 250 minor codes. Terms describing public policy are undoubtedly vague. We might have a clear idea of what health policy generally means and we are clear, for example, that legislation regulating health insurance constitutes an example of health policy. But is legislation concerning the provision of public housing a health policy? It is not usually considered to be so, but we know that poor housing contributes to ill health. Do we code legislation concerning medical training for teachers or school administrators as education or health policy? What about the provision of nurses in large schools? CAP provides coding frames and coding advice to its teams of coders over such questions, and for comparative analysis we require that coding is consistent across countries and time-frames. But these coding decisions are decisions that enable consistent analysis. They do not reflect real sharp divisions in the policy world and for some questions and comparisons they can be misleading.

When turning qualitative data into quantitative form for statistical analysis inter-coder reliability issues become important. Coders can make mistakes, they can make obvious errors and not follow the coding frame correctly. That is one sort of error. Another is that two coders can make decisions that are different but can be equally well justified in terms of the coding instructions. Such inter-coder reliability problems, if small and random, usually get lost in the noise of statistical analysis and do not affect the conclusions too much. However, if there many borderline cases, and if the coders’ contrary decisions are systematic, then they can affect analysis. What
matters here, is not so much which coder is correct, but ensuring that all coders follow the same rule, otherwise a verbal dispute can bias a substantive conclusion.

So precisifying vague terms for scientific analysis occurs and it is problematic as can provide misleading results. In their work on policy agendas in Australia for example Dowding and Martin (2017) note that expected peaks in environmental policy in the early twenty first century are not found, but this is because the legislation was coded, correctly by the coding instructions, as concerning energy policy. The authors delved down to explain the anomaly, but the example demonstrates that precisifying vague concepts by coding decisions can be misleading if not handled sensitively and carefully.

So, when it comes to doing scientific analysis borderline vagueness is not that troubling, and it can be dealt with in much the same way as ambiguity. That is, we make coding decisions for specific analysis. In doing so, we either precisify the term itself, and in doing so change the vague concept into a precise one (though need to be aware that our coding decision might be misleading), or we eliminate the vague term altogether. In the first case, we might have rival precise definitions, none of which can be said to be the correct one. When we eliminate we allow the vague term to stand in our natural language of the manifest image for reasons of efficiency; but eliminate for scientific analysis. In the latter case, sometimes the scientific terms can be relatively easily translated back into the vague term. That is, the vague term can be seen to roughly apply to the referents of the precise terms. At other times the precise terms cannot easily be turned back into the vague terms. The scientific analysis of energy can explain our folk understandings of energy, but the folk understanding of energy cannot stand for all the conclusions of the scientific use of the term.
That is all very well for pragmatic scientific analysis. It does not solve the problem for logic. Gareth Evans (1978) shows that if there are vague objects then there are no vague identity statements, and since he takes the latter claim to be obviously false the conclusion is that there can be no vague objects. It follows that vagueness is a semantic indeterminacy. As we argue above and Lewis (1988) notes, if that is the case then vague terms can have alternative precisifications that will have claim to equal validity – this is what we call ‘coding decisions’. We add to Lewis however, that these equally valid coding decisions can lead to rather different analyses of the world. We gave a relatively trivial example, but how one precisely codes civil conflict in terms of vague terms such as ‘civil unrest’, ‘insurgency’ or ‘revolution’ can have more dramatic consequences on how one analyses the causes of civil war. In such cases, it is better not to provide precisifications, but rather to eliminate the terms and code data events that themselves form part of the analysis (the coding decision) of those vague terms. Code expenditure on the military, the police, and the number of riots, strikes and so on and base one’s conclusions on those precise terms. Of course, whilst those terms are precise than the concepts for which they might act as proxy data, but they are also vague in the sense that coding decisions have to be made over what constitutes a riot, what expenditure on the military or the police is relevant and so on. However, the finer the detail of the analysis and the greater the number of coded items, the less the likely that coding decisions will prove misleading. We can chase vagueness down to more and more exactitude, just as one can measure a height ever more accurately by looking to micro measurements.

We take Evans (1978) proof to mean that the world, at some level of description is not vague. We take this to mean that a vague concept is not identical to its precisification. That can be true even of what are normally considered precise
concepts. For example, gold, as understood in natural language, is not simply the metal with atomic number 79 but also that metal with impurities. Water is a precise concept understood as H$_2$O and philosophers regularly accept water = H$_2$O as an identity statement, but the water to which we naturally refer is more than H$_2$O because it is full of impurities. Indeed, some important qualities of water such as being a good conductor of electricity is not true of pure H$_2$O. Thus, in Williamson’s terms these seems to be a ‘natural division’ between pure H$_2$O and water as ordinarily understood. In this sense all concepts have a degree of semantic indeterminacy. However, we can take vague concepts to refer roughly to extensions in the world, and precisification to more precisely refer. At times the precisification makes coding decisions that in the translation from the vague concept to the more precise one, the latter stands for the former and its extension becomes what we understand the vague concept to refer to. However, as Lewis suggests, we can have rival precisifications, whose referent are rival extensions. In this case, the precisifications are not identical to the vague concept; they cannot be or identity would not be transitive. That is Evans proof.

At times, we make coding decisions to precisfy the vague concepts, and whilst these vague concepts are often good enough for purpose, they can, at times, be misleading. Usually, when we conduct empirical analysis we eliminate the vague concept and use the finer grain descriptions. We then might re-introduce the vague concept when explaining the result. Importantly, that vague concept might be a more accurate summary of the scientific results than the precise findings. It might be more accurate to say that taller men have advantage over pay and promotion over their smaller male colleagues, than to claim that each centimetre in height gives a given

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2 We can also pedantically point out that a body of pure water would also typically contain free H and free O as well as overwhelmingly being H$_2$O.
higher probability of promotion or salary increment, since those results are based on a sample with measurement bias. Eliminating vague terms for analysis does not mean eliminating them from the language, but recognizing their more limited legitimate role. Classical logic cannot solve the Sorites paradox for vague terms. Rather than modifying classical logic, the pragmatist dumps the term, analyses his research question to his satisfaction using terms that classical logic can handle, then reintroduces the term as a handy summary of the findings. The scientist really does not care how many stones make a pile, nor how many centimetres in height makes a man tall. He just counts the stones and the centimetres and uses them in whatever he is interested in examining. Of course, we can survey people, or conduct experiments in order to estimate how many stones people think makes a pile, or at what height some category of humans is judged tall, to give an estimate of what ‘pile’ and ‘tall’ means in a given natural language. That will not mean that that estimate is good for all society, or all times and places, as an estimate is not itself precise, though it would form a precisification because it would form ‘natural’ coding decision.

The world itself might not be vague at some level of description, but it does not follow that every term in our language has to be precise in order to be meaningful. What constitutes a pile of stones might be referentially vague at the edges, but still refers and thus still has meaning though because it is vague that meaning might not always be understood. Someone might not follow the instruction ‘turn left at the cairn’ because they do not think the object that was referred by their interlocutor was large enough to constitute a cairn. However, some vague terms might not only be referentially vague, but referentially vacuous, even if their precisifications, adequately represent what we mean by the terms. This means that such vague terms are incoherent and have no referent, even though their precisifications do have reference.
Incoherence of a term comes about when our understanding of that term is confused, either by strict logical contradiction, where we take several incompatible entailments to follow from our use of the term; or for normative terms, we our intuitive understandings turn out to be in conflict with another. We illustrate this claim with the example of the collective will, and then return to a discussion of freedom.

The Collective Will as Referentially Vacuous

There are clear understandings of such terms as the public interest, that is interests that people have in common as members of the public (Barry 1990, p. 190). Each member of the public need not value that interest equally, but if the interest is common to all, then any person can be a representative of that interest. As Riker (1982, p. 291) suggests there is no need to aggregate attitudes over a public interest, to identify that interest itself. The collective will is normally thought of as the embodiment or expression of the common interest and aggregating individual viewpoints is the most obvious expression of a viewpoint which is that of the collective.

If there are objectively correct answers and there are ways of finding those answers and all individuals consider the evidence objectively and independently of each other with each having a slightly better than even chance of getting the right answer, then Condorcet’s jury theorem shows that a majority stands an increasingly better chance of finding that correct answer as the number of voters goes up. That is the basis of epistemic defences of democracy. Where there are no right answers as such, merely preferences over what should be done, then voting takes a subjective form. Collective bodies such as clubs, groups or states (hereafter groups) can act decisively with the subjective consent of all their members. Of that there is no doubt.

We can consider such actions as being conducted in terms of the collective will of the
group. It seems clear therefore that the collective will has a reference. It has a reference in the sense that, given our understanding or reasonable definition of collective will, there are clear examples of that will in action, for example when there is a unanimous preference ordering. However, like tallness there are examples where that clear definition does not give a clear reference. Unlike tallness, however, a coding decision cannot simply clear up the matter to ensure there is no mere verbal dispute. Arrow’s theorem demonstrates a logical problem with a reasonable definition of a collective will (Arrow 1951/1963). It does not show that we cannot precisify the notion, but it does show that there can be different and rival precisifications none of which, conceptually, can be considered the preferable version of the vague concept itself.

Arrow’s theorem demonstrates any way of aggregating preferences that satisfy three axioms must be dictatorial. This means that any non-dictatorial social decision mechanism determines the result of any vote as much as the voters’ input. Another way of putting this point is to say that there is no social welfare function that is the unique aggregation of the preferences of the collective and so there is no unique social decision function that can represent them. The three axioms ensure that no potential set of orderings is discounted, unanimity will be respected and manipulation though strategic voting or agenda setting is disavowed. The theorem demonstrates that these three normative desiderata cannot be simultaneously satisfied. We can try to trivialize the result by saying that Arrow demonstrates that something that prior to the proof few people would have considered exists, does not in fact exist. However, the fact that it does not exist is not trivial as the history of political theory makes clear.

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3 We do not provide a precise characterization of Arrow’s Theorem here, there are many such discussions in the literature. There is broad agreement over what it means and our characterization fits squarely within that agreement.
For our purposes, we can represent an interpretation of the proof diagrammatically as below. What we have on the left-hand side of the figure is some information. This information is a set of individual preference orderings that abide by some conditions (they are well ordered, i.e. complete and transitive). On the right-hand side, we have a representation of those preferences orderings as a single collective ordering that also abides by some conditions (it is well ordered). However, each of the representations on the right-hand side have a specific form represented by the three different shapes we have drawn, but none of these conform to the specific form of the information on the left-hand side of the figure, represented by the circle.

![Figure 1: Visual Representation of Arrow’s Proof](image-url)

The reason is that the shapes on the right-hand side are formed by the information on the left-hand side together with a specific aggregation mechanism. Those two things together create the shape. The information does not itself have an aggregation mechanism, it is simply information, and so in reality it does not have shape. If you
like, the circle is imaginary and formless. It is this imaginary and formless shape that is described by those who want to say that there is a collective will that is formed by the individual wills of each person.

In some sense, we can imagine there being a collective will on the left-hand side, just as we can imagine there might be a shape that is so terrifying that anyone who sees it goes insane.¹ But in reality, there is no shape that is so terrifying and so it cannot be drawn, only representations of it that we can pretend have that effect. In reality, there is no shape of the collective will, only representations of it that we can draw by a mechanism counting individual preferences that we can pretend is the collective will. A pretence that might be very important for binding our collective together to accept as legitimate the result of the mechanism that we in fact use to make our collective decisions.

So, we can think of the collective will as a vague concept that once we try to make precise, as Arrow did, we can see in fact is referentially vacuous. We can precisify the concept in several rival ways that will, at least sometimes, give an importantly different outcome. Each representation will directly refer to a result, given an input and the aggregation of that input by that mechanism. We cannot claim that any one of those precisifications is superior to the others, as a representation of the vague concept, since the vague concept has no precise referent.² It has no precise referent since the vague concept itself does not specify an aggregation

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¹ As one of the authors remembers occurring from a story read to him when he was a child.
² That is not to say that we cannot defend one mechanism over another on other grounds, say simplicity, or it being less open to strategic manipulation, or that we desire proportionality of first preferences to a political party to representation in a parliament. These might be good justifications for preferring one decision mechanism over another in specific circumstances, but they are not justifications of a particular mechanism over another in terms of the representation of the vague concept.
mechanism it simply assumes that there is one. But there are several such mechanisms and, under certain conditions, they do not all give the same result.

**Is the Concept of Liberty Referentially Vacuous?**

The concept of a collective will, at least as specified in terms of a well-behaved preference ranking does not have a clear reference, we dub this reference vacuity. Reference vacuity does not mean that we cannot have a vague notion of what the collective will refers to, and sometimes, for given collectives over given issues, what that collective agrees upon is clear. Rather reference vacuity of a vague concept means that if we try to precisify the vague concept we end up with rival concepts none of which is superior to the others as a precisification of the vague concept itself. We will argue that liberty, or political freedom also has that character. We will try to demonstrate that case using our example of pure negative liberty and republication freedom in the work on Ian Carter and Phillip Pettit.

Both Carter and Pettit provide formulae for measuring freedom. But both face the counter-intuitive issues that arise in the axiomatic approach to measuring freedom (for a comprehensive review of the issues see Dowding and van Hees 2009). First brought to attention by Pattanaik and Xu (1990; 1998) they provide a good place to start since they described their result as a having the flavour of an impossibility theorem. Their method assumes that we can approach the measurement of freedom by assuming that how much freedom someone has can be represented by an opportunity set of a finite number of mutually exclusive alternatives. These alternatives can be considered to be commodity bundles or actions. Pattanaik and Xu suggest three conditions as axioms that any freedom measurement should satisfy and then demonstrate only one measurement satisfies all three. The first – indifference
between no-choice situations – is that singleton sets, a choice from only one option do not offer any freedom, so with regard to the measurement of freedom (as opposed to welfare) we should be indifferent between no-choice situations. The next axiom of strict monotonocity suggests that a set that offers at least one extra option has more freedom of choice than a singleton set. The third independence condition states that adding or subtracting an alternative from two opportunity sets should not affect the freedom ranking of either with regard to the other. Pattanaik and Xu then prove that these three axioms are satisfied only by one rule, the cardinality rule, that only the number of options in an opportunity set is relevant for the amount of freedom it provides. However, as they argue such a rule is deeply counter-intuitive for it suggests that a choice between two cans of lager provides as much freedom as choice between attending church or lying in bed all morning.

Some have suggested that their approach is too restrictive and freedom is about more than mere actions or choosing commodity bundles but involves opportunities to develop oneself and open up new opportunities. However, given that freedom is a quantitative term we have to measure such opportunities somehow. One response to the cardinality problem is to suggest we much take into account the utility we gain from different options. However, a contrary problem then emerges that a measure of freedom is in danger of becoming a measure of preference or indirect preference. We might find that a choice of one highly valued options is worth more than a large number of less valued items. Certainly, such a choice offers more utility or welfare, but does it really offer more freedom.

A better response, one taken up Pattanaik and Xu themselves is that we need to add some measure of diversity modifying the independence and monotonicity axioms. Along these lines several approaches suggest incorporating opportunity
(number) and diversity by assuming opportunity sets can be described by a series of points in $n$-dimensional space. Klemisch-Ahlert (1993) suggests that freedom can be defined as the convex hull of that set, the larger the convex hull the more freedom it gives. Rosenbaum (2000) suggests we measure freedom as the normalized distance between any pair of alternatives in the opportunity set; whilst Suppes (1996) suggests entropy measures a set's freedom. The problem with all these approaches is that they allow diversity to dominate and this does not seem to equate with our intuitive understanding of freedom. Imagine two countries, one with two extreme parties of the left and the right, and another where parties of the extreme right are banned, but have a large number of parties ranging from the far left to the far right. These measures would suggest the first country provided the most freedom of political choice (van Hees 2004).

Other approaches suggest partitioning opportunity sets into elementary subsets, with the partitions being similarity relations that belong to equivalence classes. We then might rank by the number of equivalence classes we have ranking freedom by the number of dissimilar elements it has rather than the number of elements itself (Bavetta and Del Set 2001). However, it turns out these proposals do not fully overcome the original problem with the cardinality rule. Van Hees examines various such proposals but show that however Pattanaik and Xu’s axioms are modified we still come up with impossibility results.

So, we find all these axiomatic attempts to measure freedom face counterintuitive examples. Simply counting the alternatives in an individual’s opportunity set entails that choice of a larger number trivial items give more freedom that a smaller number of vital ones; attempting to add degree of preference over the items, leads to the measurement of freedom turning out to be measures of utility or indirect utility;
whilst trying to add diversity of the items, means that diversity dominates such that a
choice between a far right and far left candidates offers more freedom that between,
say a host of options from moderate right to far left. These same problems emerge
with the measures that Carter and Pettit suggest.

Carter argues that the degree of a person’s freedom can be described as the
ratio of everything that person is free to choose and the number of all the free and
unfree alternatives. He derives a freedom function of the aggregation of the
probabilities a particular action $a$ in a set of compossible actions $s$ that an agent are
unprevented. Denote the function as $F_a$, this lead to $F_a = \sum s \in S(a) p(s)$ where $S(a)$
denotes the sets of compossible actions in which action $a$ is a member and $p(s)$ is the
probability that the agent will be unprevented from performing $s$. Carter believes that
the overall freedom of a person consists not just in what she is not stopped from doing
but in the extent of those actions. So he takes a person’s freedom to the ratio of
everything is freed to choose and the number of all the free and unfree options. The
extent of a person freedom in this regard is given by $U_a = \sum s \in S(a) 1 - p(s)$ and so a
person’s freedom to do $a$ can be described as the value of $F_a/(F_a + U_a)$. We aggregate
these over all possible actions $x$ to give $\sum x \in A [F_x/(F_x + U_x)]$.

Now there are a number of intuitive problems with Carter’s measure. First, it
does not allow diversity to enter into the range of freedom as much as intuition
suggests. Actions which allow the same sets of alternatives yield the same degree of
freedom, so having three options at the cinema yields the same amount of freedom
whether they are all adventure films, all Romcoms, superhero films, or a combination
of one adventure, one Romcom ad one superhero (van Hees 2000, p. 131). Carter
(1999) suggests that the extent will tend to approximate the amount of diversity. He
suggests that the addition of a similar liberty will add less to the total amount
represented by the set than adding a completely separate liberty. He gives the example of adding new washing powders to the liberty of being able to use any washing powder. However, this response is at odds with Carter’s account that the measure is not of individual liberties, but conjunctively exercisable ones (Kramer 2003, pp. 466-71).

More problematically still if one expands the number of things one can through technological innovation, but resource constraints means that the probability of being able to access those things is limited and say everyone has an equal, but low probability of accessing them, then everyone’s freedom is been reduced (Van Hees 2000, p. 132-4). Indeed Carter (2004, p. 78), seeing this problem suggests that his formula might need to be revised. However, it is not our intention to critique Carter’s measure, merely to show that whilst it provides, on the face of it, a reasonable theoretical, if not practical way of measuring freedom, it has various counter-intuitive implications. As Van Hees (2000, p. 134) suggests it has a somewhat ad hoc nature, and the same can be said for similar measures from the freedom-from-intervention stable (such as Steiner (1994), Kramer (2003)).

Kramer (2003) brings in quantity of preference or value into his calculus to try to overcome some of the problems with Carter, but he does not grapple with the issues that occur in the axiomatic approach, that bringing in values or preferences can turn a measure of freedom into one dominated by utility or welfare. Pettit is clear that he does not want measurement of freedom to include preference over the items in an opportunity set, he says ‘your freedom can be reduced by the hindrance of any one of those options, regardless of which you happen to prefer (Pettit 2012, p. 33). So when we ask about maximizing expected freedom from two alternatives, X and Y, in an opportunity set, he suggests we need to minimize two probabilities: ‘the probability of
your being hindered in the event of choosing X and the probability of your being hindered in the event of choosing Y’ going on to suggest that ‘we should minimize a function that reflects the two probabilities in some way: say to take an over-simple proposal, we should minimize the sum that we get by adding them together.’ (Pettit 2012, p. 33), to a give formula \( p(H \text{ if } X) + p(H \text{ if } Y) \), where \( p \) = probability, and \( H \) = hindrance. However, he recognizes that with scarce resources it would be irrational to spend resources on minimizing hindrances for alternatives that we are less likely to want to choose, and so, some, for example Goodin and Jackson (2007) suggest we should focus on minimizing hindrances for alternatives more likely to be chosen, so we discount the probability of the option likely to be chosen thus we should minimize \( p(X) \cdot p(H \text{ if } X) + p(Y) \cdot p(H \text{ if } Y) \). Pettit does not want to follow that line since if that is a measurement of freedom, then one could increase freedom by getting people to want to choose alternatives that are least likely to be hindered. He does suggest that there is some-freedom relevant loss, then we might weight the harm on some normalized scale (between 0 and 1) that reflects the degree of preference. He asserts ‘so long as the degree of preference is low, the proposal will be distinct’ from the problematic proposal of Goodin and Jackson Pettit 2012, p. 35, fn 13). Such a weighting proposal starts to move us away from ordinal preference functions to cardinal utility the issue becomes rather technical and it is not at all clear that Pettit’s preferred clean break between alternatives that are given no preference weighting, and taking into account preferences can have in-between measures.

Issues become even more complex because Pettit sees two rather different types of hindrance to one’s choice. Those he calls the unvitiated range of choice and those choices are not invaded. Vitiating hindrances are generic and affect your capacity to be able to get what you want; invading hindrances are specific and are
directed at stopping you from getting what you want. The second are hindrances that reflect the will of another person, a dominator. Vitiating hindrances can be due to the structure of society and include any factors that deprive you of resources or limit your resources without directly imposing the will of another, so they include any lack of personal or social resources. Both hindrances reduce freedom: ‘unvitiated resources ensure your freedom of opportunity, the absence of subjection and invasion ensures you freedom of exercise or control’ (Pettit, 2012, p. 45). So, they both reduce freedom, or different sorts.

So, what do we include in our measure of freedom? Pettit suggests we can assume equal unvitiated capacity and measure the degree to which people are subject to the invasion of others. Or we can assume equal probabilities of invasion and measure variations in opportunity. Or we can try to measure variation across both though that would require us to weight vitiating and invasive hindrances.

Pettit recognizes that it is very unclear how we should weight different types of hindrances, though clearly thinks invasive hindrances are worse that vitiated ones. But we note that each of his three methods, and any different weight scheme will provide different precise claims about how much freedom is gained and lost in different scenario. In other words, precisifying republican freedom leads to different precise concepts. We could think of this as a coding problem. There are different versions of republican freedom, and when we come to measure how free different people are, or how free different societies are we have to make coding decisions in order to conduct that analysis. The hope would be that for most of the comparisons the coding decision would not make any material difference. That hope is not ridiculous, at worse it might mean that the precise ordering of how free we measure different societies or individual in a society might differ, but societies with similar
amounts of freedom would coalesce so the different measures would agree on the quasi-orderings of those societies or individuals. Here the coding schemes do give us different precise conceptions of the vague concept of republican freedom, but they represent that vague concept in much the same manner. The quasi-ordering is vague that the precise ordering but provides a good referent for the vague concept.

There is a deeper problem however. And this is a problem that, despite the sophisticated measurement discussion, overshadows all conceptions of freedom. Pettit recognizes being hindered in one’s choice for a preferred alternative is worse that being hindered in choosing less preferred one but suggests we should not register that harm in a measurement of freedom. He suggests that this issue is one keeping the books and measurement. However, if we are trying to conceptualize freedom precisely, then how we precisely measure freedom is not simply about measurement, it is about the meaning of freedom itself. The problem is that if we only measure the alternatives without regard to individual preferences or the diversity of the alternatives we bump up to the counter-intuitive conclusions of the cardinality approach.

**Conclusion**

Our moral vocabulary is both ambiguous and vague. Where it is ambiguous we can help sort out confusions using the methodological criterion or the subscript gambit. In doing so we can avoid confusions that are merely verbal and concentrate upon the real questions. Where the terms are vague we can precisify. In doing so we might need to eliminate the concepts altogether and use more precise ones. At times these precise concepts will be non-rival based upon coding decisions, that might create some debate, but in the general round will not cause deep moral or political issues.
Nevertheless, replacing the vague terms with more precise ones constitute a replacement and not simply be a more exact measure of the vague term.

However, moral terms (or at least some of them), are vague in a deeper sense. Here the vague term has a vacuous reference in the sense that there is nothing that the term precisely refers to. When we precisify the term we find that what we have created cannot represent, precisely, what we meant by the vague term since the precise term throws up ambiguities, and counter-intuitive implications that we do not recognize in our vague term. In fact, what this exercise demonstrates is that our vague term, once precisified is incoherent (Gallie 1956). It might be argued, for one precisification or another, that the new concept is the best representation of the vague term that is possible. For some, that would be the point of conceptual analysis or political argument. However, given that all the precisifications are different, all have some intuitiveness about them (or they would not be produced and published) as well as counter-intuitiveness, we can only say that these terms are alternative precisifications of the vague concept that have claim to equal validity as versions of the vague concept. We might prefer some to others, but we cannot justify that preference on the grounds that they provide the best representation of the vague concept, for the vague concept is incoherent. They have to be defended in their own terms.

Despite their lack of clear reference vague terms are an important part of natural language. At times using a vague concept such as ‘tallness’ is more efficient and accurate than giving the precise measurement or estimation of effect on tallness on some dependent variable (such as average salary). Similarly using a vague concept such as liberty or what is best for society can be more efficient than being more precise. For example, whilst different ways of aggregating preferences can reach very different outcomes, as long as everyone accepts as legitimate the device that is actually
used, then the outcome can be legitimately accepted as the representation of the
collective will. Similarly, the different calculations of freedom that are offered by
different authors writers will give different results under certain circumstances, but in
many circumstances, will provide similar conclusions. Indeed, given their
impracticality, the measures might be thought to be pointless for real world
application (though see for example measures of economic freedom in Fraser Institute
reports). Rather they are generated to motivate different types of defence of the
concept of freedom. Even here, we might think there is little of referential difference
despite the debate. Pettit’s (2012, pp. 92-107) account of the basic liberties, what he
thinks the republican account of liberty leads to for freedom, would hardly be
disputed by negative libertarians. Of course, what these basic liberties mean for
detailed institutional defence is more controversial, and here some differences between
the republican and negative libertarians might well open up. However, it is not at all
clear that those value judgements over the best institutions need to be defended by a
specific account of liberty.

Therein lies the problem for analytic moral and political philosophy. We hold
our deepest moral convictions in the manifest image of natural language, and that
language utilizes many vague concepts. Engaging in detailed analytic analysis of those
concepts might help to sharpen some of the debate and make clearer wherein our
moral dispute lies, but the language that we create to sharpen that debate will thereby
depart from our natural moral language, concepts and all. Analytic moral and
political philosophy as a scientific enterprise is not the same as moral and political
theory as a practical one. As practical one moral and political theory is designed to
persuade people about the good society and that implies a role for rhetoric. As
Aristotle remarked ‘it is the mark the educated to look for precision in each class of
things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: one should no more expect proofs
from a rhetorician than to expect mere plausibility from a mathematician’.

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