Semantic Externalism and the History of Ideas: A Critical Review

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Abstract

A recent innovation in the study of methods in the history of ideas is the introduction of elements of semantic externalism from the philosophy of language. Studies that rely on semantic externalism have done so to address particular questions of method in political theorising, including the interpretation of ‘essentially contested concepts’, and the issue of relativism in historical contextualism. In this paper, I critically review the use of semantic externalism, and associated methods such as Kripke’s causal theory of reference, in the history of ideas. I explore the barriers that might prevent the use of externalism, and how studies relying on externalism seek to overcome such barriers. I then assess both the implications of relying on externalism, as well as a set of limitations.

Keywords

semantic externalism – causal theory of reference – history of ideas – methods

1 Introduction

An essential part of the study of politics is the methods employed to examine political phenomena. This applies in equal measure to methods in political science and methods in political theory. The history of ideas is littered not only with theories and analyses of various political concepts but also with theories of method. The result is innumerable ways of approaching and modelling
political and philosophical analysis. Method in political theory is by no means a recent subject of concern; however, more recent trends in political theory have sought to examine and expand the conceptual underpinnings of these varying methods: intuitions now form a core part of our understanding of various concepts, contextualism and the history of ideas have themselves been subject to interrogation, to say nothing of the increasing prominence of analytic methods in political theory.\textsuperscript{1}

A recent innovation in the study of methods in the history of ideas is the introduction of elements of semantic externalism from the philosophy of language. Attention is increasingly being paid to semantic externalism in social and political theorising,\textsuperscript{2} and particularly to Kripke’s causal theory of reference.\textsuperscript{3} Not only has externalism and the causal theory been applied to social and political theory, but it has also been more recently extended to methods in the history of ideas.

Evnine, for example, relies on semantic externalism as a means of qualifying or interpreting Gallie’s notion of essential contestability. Specifically, Evnine argues that essentially contested terms share a ‘single semantic genus’ with terms denoting natural kinds.\textsuperscript{4} The relevance of semantic externalism here is that these terms tend to be introduced with reference to some ‘concrete [external] thing or things’. Evnine illustrates this approach with reference to Christianity as being premised on the paradigm, or exemplar, of the Bible, and the life of Jesus Christ. As the life of Christ becomes subject to different interpretations, these interpretations morph into different traditions of Christianity, with each taking their own trajectory.

Recently, however, the causal theory of reference has been more expansively applied as an approach to political theory by Bosworth and Dowding, who propose a method of ‘bug-detecting’ which seeks to modify the approach of the early Cambridge School with principles from the causal theory of


reference. The result is an approach that emphasises establishing the initial point of reference for a term denoting a concept and tracing the use of that term throughout its history in order to uncover the anachronistic references, sophistry, and ideology that come to be embedded in the term. Bosworth and Dowding describe these references, sophistry, and ideology as ‘conceptual baggage’. The purpose of Bosworth and Dowding’s application of the causal theory to the history of ideas is to understand how the history of certain terms has the potential to bias their use in contemporary political argument and theory. Once the potential bias is revealed, political theorists relying on such a term can then reassess whether the term is appropriate for their purposes. Bosworth and Dowding demonstrate the benefits of their approach through a discussion of terms including ‘the state’ and ‘liberty’.

Given the increasing prominence of the use of externalism in the history of ideas and political theorising, we are now in a position to critically review its application. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine and assess the use of externalism and the causal theory of reference for the study of the history of ideas. To do so, I first set out the broad tenets of semantic externalism and Kripke’s causal theory of reference to show that the original purpose and application of the approaches is terms denoting material and natural phenomena. This original application presents some barriers to translating externalism and the causal theory to social and political concepts. I then assess the capacity to extend the logic of externalism and the causal theory to social and political concepts, with reference to both Evnine’s and Bosworth and Dowding’s accounts. Specifically, I examine how they avoid those barriers. I then turn to some of the implications and limitations of relying on externalism and the causal theory for the purposes of the history of ideas.

2 Semantic Externalism and the Causal Theory of Reference

Semantic externalism is premised on the broader notion that meaning derives from, or is a product of, the external world. This account is in contradistinction with semantic internalism, which views meaning as shaped by the internal mental state of a speaker. In other words, internalism claims that meaning or expressions “don’t bear any semantically interesting relations to things in the

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world.” Putnam, one of the early proponents of externalism, summarises the view: meaning “just ain’t in the head!” In “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’”, Putnam illustrates the externalist view with his Twin Earth example, in which he images a doppelganger of Earth named Twin Earth. Twin Earth is more or less identical to Earth, only that on Twin Earth the extension of the term ‘water’ is a more or less identical substance instead comprised of the chemical \( \text{xyz} \) (rather than \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \)). The meaning of water on Earth as \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \), and as \( \text{xyz} \) on Twin Earth is therefore not a product of the mental state of a person using the term ‘water’ on their respective Earth, but instead of factors external to the speaker: the chemical composition of the substance.

A particular extension or application of semantic externalism is Kripke's causal theory of reference. Indeed, Soames points out that Naming and Necessity came to have far-reaching implications for externalism. The original purpose of the causal theory is, according to Kripke, to address then descriptivist theories of naming and reference. The descriptive account, defended primarily by Frege and Russell, encompasses two distinct interpretations. First, that terms like proper names – Aristotle – have the same meaning as a description that a speaker associates with them – the teacher of Alexander the Great; and second, that the referent of a proper name (as used by a speaker) is determined to be the only object that meets a description the speaker associates with them. A further example used by Kripke is that the proper name Richard Nixon has the same meaning as the description ‘the man who won the election in 1968’. While the descriptive theory of reference extends beyond these two interpretations, it suffices to say here that this forms the basis of Kripke's causal theory.

Kripke's charge against the descriptivist account is that it fails a test of modality. He points out that descriptions do not always hold across all other possible worlds: there is a state of affairs, for example, in which Aristotle did not teach Alexander the Great, so the description of his as such does not hold across all possible worlds. The result is that there is a set of possible worlds where the proper name Aristotle does not mean the same as a given description.

The way by which Kripke addresses this failure of the test of modality is the introduction of the notion of ‘rigid designators’. These are singular terms

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9 Soames, Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, 336–337.
that denote particular objects/individuals in all possible worlds in which that object/individual exists.\textsuperscript{10} The kinds of terms that Kripke describes as rigid designators are proper names and terms denoting natural kinds, such as ‘gold’ or ‘heat’. These form the examples he outlines through Naming and Necessity. In the case of ‘Aristotle’, the name refers to the individual, irrespective of whether or not he taught Alexander the Great.

Kripke’s extension of the causal theory to natural kinds is premised on his belief that terms denoting natural kinds are broadly analogous with proper names, and that they are not synonymous with the kinds of descriptions relied on by descriptivist theories.\textsuperscript{11} Water, which has the chemical composition $\text{H}_2\text{O}$, is rigidly designed: any substance (in the actual world or other possible worlds) that has a different chemical composition is not water. The same can be said for ‘gold’ having the atomic number 79. Any substance with a different atomic number is therefore not gold.\textsuperscript{12} Kripke points out that “a material object is (pure) gold if and only if the only element contained therein is that with atomic number 79.”\textsuperscript{13}

According to Kripke, rigid designation occurs via what is termed an initial baptism. The initial baptism is essentially a reference-fixing event, whereby a term comes to denote the particular object/individual. Given Kripke’s reliance on proper names, we might think of a scenario where Francis Nixon and Hannah Milhous are with their newborn child, with them each pointing to the baby and uttering the name ‘Richard Nixon’. It is via this baptism that the name ‘Richard Nixon’ rigidly designates the individual. Beyond such explicit baptisms, Kripke notes that an initial baptism might occur via ostension or even by description.\textsuperscript{14} Broader still, Soames describes the initial baptism as a name being ‘introduced’ for an object or person. What is important to note here is that the exact moment of reference fixing is not essential. Soames describes the question of the process by which a name got its referent as ‘trivial and uninteresting’.\textsuperscript{15} In this respect, there is no requirement to clearly identify the initial baptism in historical terms, for example. No one might have been in the room to witness Mr. Nixon and Mrs. Milhous baptise their child as ‘Richard Nixon’, but it suffices to say we can imagine such a process occurring.

\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, what makes a designator rigid is its denoting the relevant object/individual in all possible worlds, as Kripke distinguishes rigid designators from non-rigid or accidental designators.
\textsuperscript{11} Soames, Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, 424–425.
\textsuperscript{12} Dowding, The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science, 40.
\textsuperscript{13} S. Kripke, Naming and Necessity (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing 1981), 138.
\textsuperscript{14} Soames, Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, 364.
\textsuperscript{15} Soames, Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, 357.
What makes the causal theory of a reference a *causal* (or historical) theory of reference is the mechanism by which reference is then passed down. In this respect, Kripke outlines two ways by which reference, once baptised, is transmitted. The first mechanism is the chain of communication, which occurs where a reference is both transmitted and preserved. This transmission occurs where the recipient of a reference intends to use it in the same way as the transmitter. The second mechanism is reference-shift, which occurs where a reference is transmitted, but not preserved. For example, where a reference is transmitted, but the recipient then shifts it, such that the term comes to denote some other object than the original reference.

The chain of communication is the mechanism by which a reference, once baptised or designated, is passed down. Kripke describes this process as:

Someone initially “baptizes” the object, picking out the object perhaps by pointing to it, or perhaps by its properties, or perhaps by some other device. ... Speakers wish only to preserve the reference of the name, and as the name is passed from link to link, if one person wishes to use it in the same way as she heard it, she uses it with the same reference as the speaker from whom she heard it. The name gets spread throughout the community, and down through history, with only the reference preserved. All sorts of myths may arise about the object which are not really true of it.16

There is, in this respect, only one condition for a chain of communication to be a chain of communication. This condition is, as Kripke points out, that the recipient of the reference intends to use the reference in the same way as the speaker does.

The second mechanism Kripke incorporates into the causal theory is to account for the transmission of reference, where the reference does not persist. Specifically, reference-shift describes instances where a term is baptised as denoting a particular object/person, before being shifted such that the term refers to a distinct object or person. The need for such a mechanism was raised by Evans, who described changes in denotation as ‘decisive’ against the causal theory. Evans draws on the example of Madagascar:

We learn from Isaac Taylor’s book *Names and Their History*, 1898: “In the case of ‘Madagascar’ a hearsay report of Malay or Arab sailors

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misunderstood by Marco Polo ... has had the effect of transferring a corrupt form of the name of a portion of the African mainland to the great African Island.¹⁷

In this example, the term ‘Madagascar’ was originally fixed to a portion of the African mainland, before shifting to now refer to the island off the coast of Mozambique.

Responding to this example, Kripke accepts that reference can indeed shift from one object to another, and that this represents a case of reference-shift. The condition for reference-shift, according to Kripke, is that there must be a present intention (for example, of Marco Polo) to refer to a given entity (the island off Mozambique) which overrides the original intention to preserve the reference (to the African mainland).¹⁸ Once this process has occurred, and the term has been fixed, it then shifted to some other object/individual. In turn, a new chain of communication begins for the updated or shifted reference.

³     Applied to Social and Political Concepts

The capacity to draw on externalism and the causal theory to understand political and social concepts is an open question. For social and political concepts, their meaning is often a result of the actions and behaviour of human agents. These agents have their own internal idea of what the relevant concept entails. Political representatives might act in a particular way given their internalised notions of what representation is. It would seem, then, that the meaning of these terms is dependent on a kind of internalisation and so the externalist account is inappropriate.

In a similar vein, while natural kinds like gold and water have a physical form that lends itself to reference fixing, concepts in the social world do not have that same form. Paradigm instances of natural kinds are more perspicuous than social kinds. When it comes to natural kinds, their paradigm cases, and our understanding of those cases, can be identified in a clear way. Both water and gold, for example, have physical manifestations that we can fix to the kind-term with samples.¹⁹ Even with cases which are sometimes argued

¹⁸ Kripke, Naming and Necessity, 163.
to be not technically ‘natural kinds’ like species,\textsuperscript{20} we are nonetheless able to examine paradigm instances (e.g., specimens in natural history museums) of those cases in a clear way, given their physical manifestation. As social kinds or concepts lack such a physical manifestation, we cannot necessarily view their paradigm instances in a similarly clear way. We cannot, for example, examine gold in the same way that we examine justice. It is unlikely any contemporary or historical state can stand as a specimen of ideal justice. While the form of government in ancient Athens sometimes stands as a classical exemplar of a democracy, it is not a paradigm specimen in that it is clearly a ‘devolved subtype’\textsuperscript{21} in the sense that not much more than 30% of its inhabitants had the vote. In sum, there is an intuitive basis for not drawing an equivalence between natural and social kinds.

Despite these potential barriers to drawing on externalism and the causal theory for understanding social and political concepts, a set of approaches to social ontology, and legal philosophy, have sought to do just that. In this respect, there is a developing literature that suggests the logic of natural kinds also applies to social and political kinds. These approaches include Dworkin’s discussion of political terms having a core or essence, Haslanger’s examination of race and gender as ‘social kinds’, and Wendt’s use of externalism to understand social-kind terms like ‘the state’ in International Relations Theory.

Beyond these broader uses of externalism and the causal theory for the study of social and political concepts, they have found particular application in the study of the history of ideas. Specifically, Evnine and Bosworth and Dowding draw on externalism and the causal theory to interrogate the way we understand the study of the history of ideas. Evnine, for example, rather than seeking to analogise natural and social kinds, instead advances an externalist interpretation of Gallie’s idea of essentially contested concepts. Specifically, Evnine notes certain similarities between the notion of natural kinds as understood by externalists, and essentially contested concepts. For Gallie, essentially contested concepts are concepts defined by a set of conditions. The important condition for our purposes is that essentially contested concepts are derived from a single common exemplar.\textsuperscript{22} The similarity Evnine explores is that both essentially contested


concepts and natural kinds can be traced to a “single semantic genus”. While Evnine recognises that the intended target of natural kinds and essentially contested concepts are distinct, in that natural kinds refer to objects or substances, and essentially contested concepts relate to social traditions, he nonetheless draws an analogy between the two. Evnine does so at a particular level of abstraction, noting that

> [e]ssentially contested terms and natural kind terms both, then, apply to something now just in case it has a certain relation to an original sample or historical exemplar.24

The relevance of semantic externalism here is that these terms tend to be introduced with reference to some “concrete [external] thing or things”.25 Evnine largely applies this understanding of essentially contested concepts to the notion of traditions, with specific reference to Christianity. In this context, the tradition of Christianity is premised on the paradigm, or exemplar, of the Bible, and the life of Jesus Christ. As the life of Christ becomes subject to different interpretations, these interpretations morph into different traditions of Christianity, with each taking their own trajectory. Conversely, an internalist perspective on the tradition of Christianity would not be premised on these external paradigms, but instead on the internal mental state of a person who considers what Christianity means.

The application of semantic externalism to concepts of interest to historians of ideas is further evident in the concept of the state. Indeed, the concept of the state is the foremost example relied on by Bosworth and Dowding. Take Hobbes in *Leviathan*. Skinner credits Hobbes with fixing the modern meaning of the term ‘the state’ as we know it. This was done not by a mere definition or description, nor was it done on Hobbes’ internal mental state (à la internalism). In Chapter 42, Hobbes pointed demonstratively to a *sample* of paradigmatic cases of the state, or what to him was the same thing, a Commonwealth:

> all Christian kings, popes, clergy, and all other Christian men make but one Commonwealth: for it is evident that France is one Commonwealth, Spain another, and Venice a third, etc.26

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He went on to suggest Commonwealths were states in the sense they were “seats” upon which the Sovereign sat. So, Hobbes could have been said to have baptised the modern reference of the state with a sample (much like the reference of natural-kind terms would have been fixed) and a non-literal metaphor.

4 Implications and Limitations

Having set out the core tenets of the use of semantic externalism and the causal theory in this history of ideas, we can now critically assess the various implications and limitations of the approach. As it relates to implications, the use of externalism and the causal theory has the potential to speak to various issues in contemporary political theory. Two of the more prominent are the relevance of the historical canon as well as the potential for bugs in terms in our political vocabulary.

However, despite all the benefits of the approaches examined in this paper, they are, admittedly, not without fault. As will be explored below, the approach has several limitations, the foremost of which is the capacity of externalism and the causal theory to apply to terms and concepts that have been interpreted, applied, and understood in a more expansive fashion.

I address each of these implications and limitations in turn.

4.1 The Relevance of the Historical Canon

One of the more common challenges to historians of ideas is the relevance of the historical canon. These challenges come from both trained professional political theorists, but also from undergraduate students in political theory courses. Why does Hobbes matter for our contemporary understanding of the state? What can Locke tell us about governing with the consent of the governed? How does Rousseau conceptualise human nature? Each challenge asks us to consider why theorists from centuries past matter for our understanding of the social and political world.

The extent of the tension between the history of political thought and contemporary political theory is evident in the debates surrounding the existence of a ‘historical tradition’. The central premise of the historical tradition is that there is a set of classic texts (such as those by Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Marx, for example) that represent an “inherited pattern of thought.”

arguments for the existence of the historical tradition, there has been an ongo-
ing characterisation of the tradition as a myth. Gunnell, for example, in “The Myth of the Tradition”, argues that while some classic texts might indeed have some bearing on contemporary political thought, the existence of the historical tradition is “academic folklore.”\(^{28}\) He concludes by noting that

There are similarities between these works and similarities between the circumstances and concerns of their authors which justify comparison and generalization and an attempt to isolate them analytically and consider them as a type of literature which can be related to contemporary thought. But it is one thing to engage in a conversation with the past and quite another thing to stage a conversation with the past.\(^{29}\)

Gunnell is by no means alone in this characterisation of the tradition as a myth. Condren, in *The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts*, for example, doubts the existence of the tradition in a similar way.\(^ {30}\) This extends outside history of political thought. As it relates to the history of philosophy, Sauer’s recent article “The End of History” suggests that studying the history of philosophy is itself philosophically unhelpful.\(^ {31}\)

The broader implication of an externalist approach to the history of political thought is to show the relevance of the historical canon. In establishing how the meaning of certain key concepts is passed down to us, it solidifies the fact that our contemporary understanding of the state is influenced or derived from Hobbes; that our ideas about government with the consent of the people comes to us through Locke, and that Rousseau’s views on human nature feed into elements of contemporary socialist thought. Indeed, this is something we can demonstrate empirically. As Skinner makes clear, we can see how Hobbes is responsible for a substantive change in meaning – or reference-shift on an externalist account – of the concept of the state.\(^ {32}\) The result is the fixing of the reference for the state to a legal entity. In turn, studies in history illustrate the passing down of the reference to subsequent theorists such as Locke,\(^ {33}\) who

\(^{28}\) Gunnell, “The Myth of the Tradition,” 133.


himself influenced ideas concerning American statehood. This process occurs in a similar fashion to Kripke’s example of Richard Feynman in the marketplace.\(^{34}\) Once the reference for a term is fixed, we can clearly and empirically demonstrate how that reference comes to influence us in contemporary political theory.

We can see how this reasoning applies to various other concepts in our political vocabulary. Take, for example, Bosworth and Dowding’s examination of Locke’s account of property. They suggest that Locke’s fixing of the reference for the term ‘property’ included his theological premises, such that his theology was embedded in any subsequent use of the term.\(^{35}\) While this characterisation of the influence of religion on Locke’s account of property is not novel,\(^{36}\) an externalist approach to Locke’s view of property is distinct from traditional interpretations, such as Dunn’s, in that it demonstrates how Locke’s account persists through to contemporary political theory.\(^{37}\)

So, when political theorists and historians of ideas are challenged, whether by their colleagues or their students, on the relevance of the history of ideas for political theorising, externalism provides the means by which we can demonstrate this relevance by way of the history of political thought. The meaning of political concepts is fundamentally tied to the past.

### 4.2 Bug-Detecting

The second set of implications that follow from externalism and the causal theory has been explored already by Bosworth and Dowding. In particular, they note that the mechanism of reference-shift can result in our contemporary semantic intuitions being biased or coded by the past.

The potential for bias or coding is a result of the way that reference-shift occurs. Recall that reference-shift is where a term that is fixed to an object is shifted, so that it comes to be fixed to some other object. In Kripke’s example of Madagascar, the term ‘Madagascar’ was originally fixed to a portion of the African mainland, only for it to come to refer to the island off the coast off Mozambique.\(^{38}\) However, this shift in reference is shaped by particular features about the world. On Bosworth and Dowding’s account, an instance of

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38 Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 163.
reference-shift (or conceptual change) occurring is contingent not so much on the intention of the classic theorist making a given statement (as is the belief of the Cambridge School) but primarily on the perlocutionary dimension of the statement. Perlocutionary dimensions are the way that a particular utterance is received by an audience. What leads an audience to accept an instance of conceptual change can, in turn, become embedded in the term itself. Bosworth and Dowding describe the elements that influence audiences as ‘conceptual baggage’. This baggage is defined as “anachronistic assumptions, sophistry, or ideology that would have been important for historical audiences accepting the ideals that motivated the linguistic alteration.”39 They explain the idea by discussing Sherlock Holmes such that

[i]t is the conceptual baggage accommodated with the use of the name “Sherlock Holmes” by virtue of a past audience passing down the name of the hero of their interpretation of Conan Doyle’s story.40

The same can be said for changes in political terms. When we examine Hobbes’ changing of the reference of the term ‘the state’, we look to how his audience received his texts. Any assumptions, sophistry, or ideology that motivates that change would therefore become embedded in the term.

Bosworth and Dowding suggest that the potential for bias in our political terminology arises from externalism itself. Recall that the central premise of externalism is that the world, external to the beliefs of the speaker, determines the correct application of terms. However, a potential consequence of externalism is that we make mistakes about the external world when describing (or conceptualising) it. Our descriptions will therefore be faulty, in that they have incorporated errors about the world. So external factors which are true of the Greek polis become encoded into peripheral understandings of the modern state for which they have no part.41 In other words, oftentimes we might think the state takes on certain properties, when it does not. Such descriptive errors would not be possible if the associated descriptions constituted the meaning of the concept.

All of this is to say that a consequence of externalism for doing this history of political thought is the identification of errors in political theorising. These

39 Bosworth and Dowding, The Cambridge School and Kripke: Bug Detecting with the History of Political Thought, 622.
40 Bosworth and Dowding, The Cambridge School and Kripke: Bug Detecting with the History of Political Thought, 638 [original emphasis].
errors result in bugs in the way we think about, for example, human nature, which gets passed down through the history of ideas. As theory feeds into practice, these bugs have consequences for political practice. This is the idea of ‘bug-detecting’ which Bosworth and Dowding describe. Using an analogy with computer language where computer script which has been left behind from earlier programs can cause the current program to crash, Bosworth and Dowding suggest that our arguments can similarly crash or go wrong because implications from concepts can emerge in modern contexts for which they have a reference. This is clear with respect to the concept of property following Locke. When Locke shifted the reference of the term, the theological premises of his account were embedded in it. As a result, we unknowingly accommodate religious baggage when we appeal to property rights.

Once we go about identifying conceptual baggage embedded in certain terms in our political vocabulary, the question remains as to how we should go about addressing or exorcising it. In other words, we need a set of techniques and methodologies to remove bugs from our political terms, once identified. While Bosworth and Dowding’s method of ‘bug-detecting’ is a means for identifying potential bugs, it is not necessarily a ‘debugging program’. In this way, the scope of what Bosworth and Dowding suggest for ‘doing the history of political thought’ is limited. We might, as they suggest, be able to re-definition certain terms, or revaluate certain ideological commitments we have, but these are not complete and systematic methods for addressing such problems. It might be the case that we have to turn to other methods in the methodological toolbox, such as elimination.

A further means of addressing this issue of conceptual baggage is the method of conceptual engineering – a breakout field in philosophy. More broadly, the project of conceptual engineering encompasses two approaches: first, ‘de novo conceptual engineering’ which is concerned with designing new concepts, and second, ‘conceptual re-engineering’, which involves fixing an existing concept. While general definitions of conceptual engineering (both de novo and re-engineering) vary, the core premise of the approach, according to Chalmers, is the project of designing, evaluating, and implementing concepts. It is a project for the deliberate development of concepts into new contexts. Djordjevic points out that conceptual engineering has two particular

42 Bosworth and Dowding, The Cambridge School and Kripke: Bug Detecting with the History of Political Thought, 641.
domains: a political domain and a scientific domain. The political domain is that where there are identifiable “problematic biases, unfair pragmatic effects, and so on,” conceptual engineering allows us to exorcise those bugs. This can, according to Haslanger, result in newly engineered concepts fostering social justice.

Indeed, this potential to remove problematic biases or bugs in certain terms or concepts suggests a nexus between the history of political thought and conceptual engineering. Specifically, accepting that externalism and the causal theory provides a way to identify bugs in the use of certain terms or concepts, an externalist approach to conceptual change provides a further way of evaluating concepts. Should, for example, we undertake some evaluation of our concept of the state, and whether it is appropriate for contemporary political theorising, we can turn to a set of methodological tools to conduct such an evaluation. We might see how the concept conforms to the intuitions of individuals about statehood or see where the concept of the state fits within a given broader theoretical framework. In this way, an externalist approach to conceptual change fits broadly within what Chalmers characterises as the ‘evaluation’ dimension of conceptual engineering. This suggests that doing the history of political thought is a valuable way of detecting possible biases or bugs in our modern concept of the state that techniques like conceptual engineering can proceed to address.

The value of externalism for the history of ideas, therefore, is that it enables us to identify where certain bugs become embedded in the terms in our political vocabulary. Once those bugs have been identified, we can turn to methods such as conceptual engineering to be able to correct these potential biases. Indeed, the model of conceptual change advanced here can be seen as a justification for certain kinds of conceptual engineering.

**4.3 Expansive Terms**

All of this is to say that the use of semantic externalism and the causal theory has a clear set of benefits for the study of the history of ideas. However, this is not to say that the approach is not without limitations. One such limitation is the capacity of the externalist approach to extend to terms that have been interpreted, understood, and conceptualised in various, often expansive, ways. When it comes to doing the history of political thought for these concepts, the

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task becomes seemingly insurmountable. While I focus on a particular example here, the nature of expansive terms severely limits the capacity to rely on semantic externalism for a broader range of political concepts.

The basis of this limitation can be illustrated with reference to the various examples detailed above. These examples have tended to be those with a relatively confined set of accepted meanings, and a fairly linear history. Take, for example, the concept of the state. Recall that Skinner points out that, prior to Hobbes, the meaning of ‘the state’ can be broadly construed as a kind of princely status. Following Hobbes, the meaning of the state evolved to refer to a political entity, or legal construction. This later conception of the state is what has largely persisted through to our contemporary understanding of the state.

In this respect, the history of the state is both confined, in that (either prior to, or following Hobbes) its meaning has revolved around a confined set of definitions, and linear, in that one broad set of definitions was shifted to another. The same can be said for the concept of political representation. Drawing on Pitkin’s examination of the concept of political representation, we see that the history of the concept is relatively linear and confined. Limited in that its history can be characterised as revolving around a particular set of theorists (such as Hobbes, Burke, and Madison), and linear in that (for the most part) each interpretation followed another. Terms with a confined and linear history are more suited to an externalist approach in that there is a limited set of changes that might be reference-shifts.

However, terms that have been interpreted, understood, and conceptualised in a more expansive way have the potential to pose limitations to the externalist account. This is not to say that these limitations cannot be overcome or addressed, but they require a greater effort to do so. The effort required has the potential to make doing the history of ideas for these terms infeasible.

The potential for expansive terms to be a limitation on the externalist account is evident in the example of ‘the political’. Throughout the history of ideas, the concept of ‘the political’ has been understood, interpreted, and applied, in a myriad of various ways. Indeed, this characterisation of meaning of ‘the political’ as being broad, and bordering on vague, is by no means new. In his “What Does ‘Political’ Mean?”, Miller’s stated goal is his desire to resolve the degrees of ambiguity that surround the term. He begins by noting that we use the term ‘political’ to refer to various things, including institutions,
actions, and conflicts, as well as the internal affairs of businesses, schools, and churches. In a similar vein, Hauptmann notes that various theorists, even those engaging with the concept of ‘the political’ find its meaning to be elusive, puzzling, and vague. Not only is there ambiguity in the meaning of ‘political’, Miller goes on to claim that the various methodologies employed in political science are unable to account for the meaning of ‘political’. Recent ‘scientific’ approaches to linguistics largely fail, given that ‘political things’ are neither unequivocal nor empirical. Furthermore methodological principles such as ‘meaning as use’ (traditionally associated with Skinner’s contextualism) are just as unsatisfactory.

Miller and Hauptmann both speak to this ambiguity surrounding the concept of the political, which has, in turn, led to a range of possible interpretations. First, ideas concerning ‘the political’ tend to revolve around the state. Miller, for example, seeks to resolve the ambiguity surrounding the term by locating its origins in Aristotle. Specifically, he traces the origins of the term to the Greek polis – a particular kind of human community. Relying on the notion of a pros hen equivocal, something with ‘many senses pointing in many ways to a central sense’, Miller goes on to establish that the central sense of ‘political’ is the political community (the polis). Other things that are termed political are therefore done so by virtue of their relation to the polis. An example Miller gives is the polites, which is “the person who has a right to share in the distinctive work of the polis – the work of deliberating and judging.” What Miller means by something having a relation to the polis is somewhat broad, and includes things like sustaining it, ennobling it, or its cause or effect.

This view of the political as having some nexus with the state extends to our broader political vocabulary. Even a cursory survey of ‘political’ terms and concepts reveals that the state is a common denominator. The concept of ‘political obligation’ for example, has three aspects: 1) to whom or what political obligations are owed to – including the identification of political authority; 2) how far those obligations go; and 3) what are the origins of political obligation. As Smith points out, political obligation correlates with political authority; political authority is, in turn, ‘political’ in that authority is “taken to be the state, or the government, or its representatives.” The same can be said for the concept of political representation. Representation itself is a term that has use in the

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50 Miller, What Does ‘Political’ Mean?, 57.
51 Miller, What Does ‘Political’ Mean?, 61.
realms of art, law, and cognitive science. However, ‘political representation’ is distinct from ‘representation’ as it relates to these other domains by virtue of its relation to the ancillary concepts of the state and its institutions.

Despite the meaning of the political largely revolving around the state, the ambiguity in the term has resulted in a wider set of possible definitions. In Alejandro’s defence of the ‘political’ character of Rawls' political liberalism, he sets out fourteen ways of understanding ‘the political’. These include:

1. a system of rules to realize the good of justice where justice is understood as the distribution of goods according to fair procedures;
2. the quest for, and the institutionalization of, common goods;
3. a practice that defines and encourages the quest for a public understanding of the human good;
4. the pursuit of glory;
5. the teaching of the virtues for the sake of the individual’s character;
6. the teaching of the virtues for the sake of the public structure;
7. participation for its own sake;
8. the creation of state power;
9. a system of principles to address and, if possible, to solve conflicts;
10. as an arena of conflicting vocabularies where consensus is impossible.\textsuperscript{53}

While many of these possible definitions are concerned with the state, such as (10), many do not. This range of possible alternatives further speaks to the ambiguity in the meaning and history of ‘the political’.

Even beyond these possible conceptions of the political, a further set of views concerning the political have arisen out of the ‘Berkeley School’. As the name suggests, these are theorists associated with the University of California Berkeley, including Jacobson, Pitkin, Schaar, and Wolin. The basic tenets of the view of the political espoused by the Berkeley School seemingly follow a similar line as Rawls’ definition of a political conception of justice as ‘freestanding’. Specifically, Hauptmann argues that for the Berkeley School

What “the political” is meant to designate, therefore, is pointedly distinguished from institutionally grounded conceptions of “politics” as well as from “the state” or “government.” As a substantative, “the political” is neither organized activity nor an institution; it is instead a distinct sphere of human life or a distinct kind of human potential. On either of these

views, politics and states may thrive when the political is stunted or altogether absent.\textsuperscript{54}

This position of the Berkeley School, therefore, represents a further way that the meaning of the political has varied, and indicates the breadth of the approaches to the term and concept.

The extent of the ambiguity and expanse of the interpretations of the political presents a limitation to doing the history of ideas on an externalist account. While we might say that ambiguity is a limitation on doing the history of ideas in a more general sense, independent of externalism, the limitation this presents for externalism is a result of the notion of conceptual baggage from Bosworth and Dowding’s ‘bug-detecting’. Recall that for bug-detecting, we examine the history of ideas for instances of reference-shift and determine whether that shift results in any bugs being embedded in our contemporary political terminology. Any faults that arise from conceptual baggage require us to consider whether the term has a place in our political vocabulary.

For expansive terms that have been subject to various changes in meaning, and (prima facie) various reference-shifts, the potential for conceptual baggage raises the question as to whether there is any use of certain terms in contemporary political argument. Bug-detecting makes clear that at each change in meaning, the term comes to be embedded with conceptual baggage. This does not present much of a problem for confined and linear terms. The history of the concept of the state, for example, has seen one instance of reference-shift.

However, when it comes to terms like the political, the meaning of which has changed various times, it becomes a complex task to identify all the possible baggage that is embedded in the term at each change. If, for example, the initial reference fixing event is, as Miller describes, the term coming to denote the \textit{polis}, then a set of ideas about the nature of the \textit{polis} are embedded in the term, such as community and justice. Any subsequent shift in reference with respect to the state, any of Alejandro’s list of fourteen possible conceptions of the political, or subsequent shifts in reference associated with the Berkeley School, has the effect of embedding different kinds of conceptual baggage in the term.

The cumulative effect of each of these shifts in reference is the embedding of such a degree of conceptual change that either i) the task for the historian of ideas becomes infeasible or ii) the degree of conceptual baggage that cannot be justified is so great that popular terms in our political vocabulary like ‘the political’ are unable to be employed in contemporary political argument.

\textsuperscript{54} Hauptmann, \textit{A Local History of ‘the Political’}, 36.
This is not to say that the limitations associated with expansive terms are fatal to the externalist approach. There are, for example, ways that we can address or overcome such a limitation. Specifically, we can return to the premise of externalism. In order to provide some clarity or refinement to the concept of the political, for example, externalist reasoning means that our description of the political should correspond to how the political exists in the world. Should the meaning of political representation come to be expanded in such a way that it becomes too expansive for an externalist model of conceptual change to adequately capture, we can always look back to the world: the way that representatives act, for example.

All of this is to say that if our concern is the practice of the history of ideas or demonstrating how the meaning of certain key concepts is passed down to us through history, we cannot escape the fact that this task will not always be so straightforward. Not only does the meaning of social and political concepts come to us from centuries past, but the road they travel is not necessarily straight and well-paved. For certain concepts, the breadth of historical evidence that requires examination presents what is essentially a feasibility constraint. This is, again, not to say that such a barrier cannot be overcome, rather that it is dependent on the capacities of the historian to conduct the necessary historical examination.

5 Conclusion

The continuing methodological innovations in contemporary political theorising have resulted in the kinds of externalist approaches advanced by Evnine and by Bosworth and Dowding. However, the incorporation of semantic externalism and the causal theory of reference into the study of the history of ideas comes with its own set of challenges. As we have seen, even relying on externalism requires addressing the question of whether the approach can be extended to non-material or natural phenomena. The extent to which we can overcome this question of application is by no means clear. Similar reasoning applies to the causal theory of reference. Given its original intended application to proper names and terms denoting natural kinds, it can only be applied to social and political terms in particular ways.

Once we reach a point of relying on semantic externalism for the purposes of this history of ideas, both Evnine’s and Bosworth and Dowding’s respective approaches illustrate the benefits of the approach. In light of the debate over the relevance of the historical canon for contemporary political theorising,
externalism provides a cogent means of demonstrating the value of the canon. The same can be said for the method of bug-detecting: it provides a means of identifying where there are bugs in the terms employed in certain arguments. Again, these benefits must be read in the context of potential limitations to the use of externalism. In this respect, while the use of semantic externalism and the causal theory of reference indeed has benefits to the study of the history of ideas, we should nonetheless proceed with caution in relying on such an approach.