**Concept formation**


Disinterested inquiry starts, not with what people do, or even with what the stuff of nature does, but with concept formation, *Begriffsbildung*, the postulation of an idea, an abstract proposition, from which the scholar can build a conceptual framework with which to interpret or explain an element of experience. As with interested inquiry, disinterested scholars generally start concept formation with a definition, but the object of the definition is not some concrete thing or set of actions, but a concept, an idea, an intellectual proposition, something that exists in thought and words. Concepts are intellectual objects and detached inquiry concerns ideas, not things or activities. The ideas may be about things or activities, but the inquiry is about the ideas, which must not be confused with the things or activities to which they might refer. And frequently, perhaps always rigorously speaking, the objects to which they refer are imaginary, conceptual, ideal, not the tangible actualities themselves. Consequently, as a noun, the term "gravity" refers to a theoretical concept accounting for countless phenomenal behaviors, not to an objective force, but to a conceptual explanation.

To find excellent examples, consult Galileo’s *Two New Sciences*. In that work, Galileo gave many powerful, conceptual definitions. One started the "fourth day’s dialogue," investigating the motion of projectiles: "imagine any particle projected along a horizontal plane without friction; then we know, from what has been more fully explained in the preceding pages, that this particle will move along this same plane with a motion which is uniform and perpetual, provided the plane has no limits." This particle is thoroughly conceptual, patently counterfactual with respect to the world of experience, with proofs in thought, explained in prior pages, accounting for the imagined behavior of the postulated objects.\footnote{Galileo Galilei, *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences*, Henry Crew and Alfonso de Salvio, trans., (New York: Dover Publications, n.d.), p. 244.} The word "any" here is deeply significant, and earlier, at the start of the "third day’s dialogue" on uniform motion, Galileo significantly called attention to its importance as he explicitly inserted it into the traditional definition of uniform motion – motion in which equal distances are traversed in equal times becoming motion in which equal distances are traversed "during any equal intervals of time." \footnote{*Two New Sciences*, p. 154.} Any here drives the definition out of the realm of particular instances and locks it securely in the conceptual realm, with the proposition applying, not to this or that perceived motion, apparently uniform, but to any conceivable motion, any thinkable one. Whether it touches on moving objects or cultural events, detachment works to generate in thought a conceptual understanding or
explanation that will hold as an intellectual proposition about any conceivable instance.³

Intellectual, not material, action is at stake in concept formation. A well-formed idea may or may not serve a concrete, tangible interest; it does not exist, however, for that purpose. With instrumental inquiry so widespread, people become far too crass in the way they understand the pragmatic cash value of ideas; their payoff is properly, not material, but intellectual in disinterested thought. With well-formed concepts, thought grasps meaning and explains causalities intelligible in actual experience. Concepts serve in thinking, in reflecting on experience, not in experience itself.

Good concept formation is disinterested because what is at stake in thinking effectively is of a different order, an ideal order, than the tangible interests at stake in the actual experience. Whether or not the interpretations or explanations achieved through good concept formation further the interests of a privileged group is immaterial – in both senses of the word, irrelevant and ideal, not material. Concept formation has powerful uses, however, in that it empowers people to query experience, to ask how and why and with what significance the actual differs from the ideal – the ideal, not in the sense of the perfect or most desirable, but in the sense of the conceptual, the theoretical, what thought leads us to expect.

As the Stoics realized, conceptual thinking is a great locus of freedom and control because it allows an actor to bring concepts and experience together,

³ Historians and others, apparently dealing with unique particulars, have sometimes suggested that discourse applicable to "any" instance is characteristic of natural science, as distinct from the Geisteswissenschaften or human sciences. As Max Weber showed in his critique of Eduard Meyer in The Methodology of the Social Sciences, (Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, trans., New York: Free Press, 1949), pp. 127ff., the problem of the unique can be exaggerated, for the first act of conceptualization in any science is to abstract from particulars a set of ideal categories about which to think, even if the thinking is to interpret the uniqueness of the particular. Natural science, like the human, starts in a primitive sense with unique particulars – this tree or that rock or the night sky as it appears now. Nature has yielded instances of its homogeneous elements only after its was subjected to much post-theoretical refining. Hence all sciences, the natural and the human, touch upon particulars and develop through the formation of concepts in the realm of thought; they construct the realm of thought by inventing concepts elaborating its contents. Within that realm, students of the human sciences often want to preserve the particularity of what they study, and even in such an effort, an "any" remains, for they cannot abstract themselves out of the intellectual construct that they create and consequently the "any" for them applies, not to the unique object of interpretation or explanation, but to the interpreter or explainer – "any interpretation will need to take this construction of the matter into account." Were the discourse to insist on the unique particularity of the interpreter, it would be without meaning or value as a communication. And interpretation becomes partial, partisan, and dangerous when voiced as if only a special group of interpreters, those who share an identity defined by external characteristics, can make the interpretation and partake in the values it nurtures. In contrast, disinterested study of the particular results is an ideal construction in thought, one pertinent to any intellectual consideration of it, which creates an open discourse in which any and all can participate.
disclosing numerous options. The discrepancies between idea and actuality permit one to improve the concepts, or to change concrete actualities, or to do both. Interested inquiry is unidirectional, defined by the vector of interest. Disinterested inquiry is omnidirectional, responsive to the play of concept formation, which allows for the critique of established ideas and the unexpected construction of improved conceptual frameworks for thinking about experience anew. Thus, detached inquiry tends to be less instrumental in its results and more critical. We may say that theory is critical, not by the intention of the theorist, but by the character of theory itself. Theory becomes uncritical only when people hypostatize it, taking it out of the conceptual realm and putting it there in the world as a self-subsisting entity, like other actors, acting and being acted on. Keeping to the realm of the ideal, of thought, disinterested inquiry proceeds through concept formation to create coherent ideas, with reference to which people can ask questions about the source and significance of their concrete experience.

Standing back from the rough and tumble of political action, political thinkers have engaged in dispassionate, detached reflection and formed numerous, powerful concepts – justice, equality and equity, legitimacy, obligation, freedom, liberty, property, rights, the state, democracy, representation, power, and on. Present-day thinkers in the field engage productively with past thinkers as they try to further develop, expand, and correct key concepts formed by their predecessors in it. The concepts take on great significance for human life, not as they are used mechanically to shape behavior to their putative specifications, but as they are used critically to understand why behavior, in its divergent particularity, is the way it is, and to disclose creatively what it can become, what perhaps it should become.