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SIMPLE EMPIRICAL CONCEPTS, COMPLEX DEMANDING CONCEPTS, AND TOPICAL EQUILIBRIUM IN PHILOSOPHY

Abstract

Philosophy traditionally deals with such lexicalized concepts as WISDOM, VIRTUE, REASON, WORLD VIEW, INFINITE UNIVERSE, and PHILOSOPHY. They trigger interest in philosophy particularly because they are hard to understand and explain. It is all the more surprising that many contemporary philosophers focus on such concepts as DOG, CHAIR, and FLIGHT to build their theories and provide examples. The article argues that to preserve topical equilibrium and avoid methodological problems, both classes of concepts should be involved in philosophical theorization and exemplification. The first part critically discusses attempts at identifying these classes as ordinary vs. big (Gauker), empirical vs. pure (Kant), and concrete vs. abstract (contemporary psycholinguistics). It introduces the opposite pair simple empirical vs. complex demanding concepts as an alternative heuristic tool to evaluate concepts. The second part elaborates on the concept of concept and structural similarities between the two classes of concepts in semantic and 'onomantic' perspectives. The third part shows that despite structural similarities, such factors as the availability of empirical data, identification of the referent, historical and theoretical loadedness, complexity, and demandingness indicate that simple empirical and complex demanding concepts should be addressed in different ways. The final part elaborates on the notion of topical equilibrium as a philosophical method and norm and discusses two further examples (COW and ARTHRITIS) from contemporary debates in conceptual engineering.

Keywords: concepts · classification of concepts · concreteness ratings · topical equilibrium · conceptual engineering · word-concept distinction · philosophical taxonomy · metaphilosophy.

1 Introduction

It is often being said that the domain of philosophical investigations is unlimited. Philosophy can deal with literally everything.¹ The name 'philosophy' itself does not prescribe a focus on any particular object. Originally, it meant

1 This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to understand and delimit the subject matter of philosophy (see Overgaard et al. 2013: 1-5).

commitment to knowledge in the widest sense, including the knowledge of visited countries, stars, and skills (cf. Ueberweg 1871: 2 and Kranz 2007). If one sticks to this original meaning, there is nothing wrong with such phrases as ‘the philosophy of hair’ or ‘barometer is a philosophical tool.’² In both cases ‘philosophy’ is related to a skill and handicraft, which harmonizes with the earlier understanding of ‘sophia’. Such titles of contemporary books as ‘Phenomenology of Flight’ (Röhnert 2019), ‘Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing’ (Berndtson 2024), and ‘Philosophy of Hip-Hop’ (Manemann and Brock 2018) indicate that philosophy is more than ever concerned with ‘sophia’ in a very broad and unspecified sense. The philosophy of well familiar empirical facts and phenomena examines only a very limited part of philosophically interesting objects and cannot provide complete intellectual satisfaction. Being a member of a state and interacting with its institutions alone requires knowledge of justice, law, morality, religion, scientific methods, and philosophy. If philosophy wants to realize what is written within the name, it must constantly focus on both ordinary familiar and superordinary, less familiar topics. It must maintain a sort of ‘topical equilibrium’.

One popular way to answer the question “What is the object of philosophy?” is to claim that philosophy is concerned with concepts, because knowledge is associated with thought, and concepts are the “building blocks of thought” (Laurence and Margolis 2024; cf. Shea 2024, Sainsbury and Tye 2012: 20-21). This way to conceive philosophy seems to close the gap between the two poles. One could say that there are as many different topics in philosophy as there are concepts.³ For example, there are concepts of flight and breathing, which allow for a phenomenology of flight and breathing, and there are concepts of virtue and metaphysics, which enable philosophical works on virtue and metaphysics. The mediating power of concepts has nevertheless its limits. The conception of philosophy as dealing with concepts faces at least three problems. Firstly, although the category of concept is widely accepted, even among different and competing research traditions, philosophers struggle with different conceptions of concepts. This includes such questions as how one should understand the structure of concepts, how concepts relate to language and refer to objects in the world. Secondly, there are conceptual trends. Contemporary philosophy seems to be highly interested in concepts of well familiar facts. This is partly due

2 Hegel (2010: 35-36 and fn. 10) disagreed when he gave these examples of the use of ‘philosophy’ in England at his time.

3 Williamson (2022: 16) has criticized this view as the “*absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy*”. I agree that philosophy is not only about concepts (but also, e.g., about objects, language, and values). However, it is a different question whether one can do philosophy without concepts of objects, language, and values or without the category ‘concept’ in general (see *ibid.*, xxiv-xxvi and Lewin and Williamson 2023: 53). My strategy here is to use this answer to the challenge of topical diversity as a heuristic theory and suggest the best possible concept of concept that will be immune against the critique of the *absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy*.

to the historical impact of the eclipse of religions in some societies, radical critique of metaphysics, therapeutic visions of philosophy, ordinary language philosophy, and academic conformity.⁴ On the other part, philosophy seems to struggle for its market and social value and thereby rely on rather familiar empirical concepts. This could be a bad strategy given that what has consequently sparked interest in philosophy were complex problematic concepts and debatable cultural and religious values. Thirdly, there is a methodological risk of mixing simple empirical concepts with more complex, demanding ones. But just because both a table and dog on the one side and virtue and metaphysics on the other are examples of concepts, it does not mean that they are of similar types and have to be treated alike. Knowledge about empirical concepts and methods developed to treat them may be of little to no value when it comes to more complex concepts.

In the following, I want to address these three problems. In the first part, I will critically discuss the opposite pairs *ordinary vs. big* (Gauker 2011), *empirical vs. pure* (Kant), and *concrete vs. abstract* (contemporary psycholinguistics) to classify concepts. Kant's distinction between empirical and pure concepts as one of the major achievements in philosophy will lay the ground for my distinction between *simple empirical* and *complex demanding* concepts. Both classes of concepts will be understood as heuristic poles, with concepts of varying degrees of complexity positioned between them. The second part will elaborate on semantic and onomantic structural similarities between the two classes of concepts. In particular, it will be argued that simple empirical and complex demanding concepts share the same semantic structure (lexicalization plus conceptual content and reference, even if the reference is not always clear in the case of complex concepts). In the onomantic perspective, all lexemes that express concepts (the names of concepts, e.g., 'chair' and 'wisdom') have empirical and metaphorical origins. In the third and last part, I will argue that structural similarities are insufficient to justify the equal treatment of simple empirical and complex demanding concepts. Such factors as the availability of empirical data, identification of the referent, historical and theoretical loadedness, complexity, and demandingness indicate that simple empirical and complex demanding concepts should be

4 It is hard to historically reconstruct this shift within philosophy. One possible way could be the examination of the understanding of *reason* as one of the most relevant concepts and topics in philosophy. Strong concepts of reason, e.g., the Kantian concept of pure reason or the Hegelian concept of reason qua the self-unfolding absolute idea, can provoke intellectual crises and the search for 'the other of reason' (cf. Gloy 2001, Lewin 2021). As the history of universities in 19th-century Germany has shown, the institutionalization of strong reason can lead to the rise of diverse philosophies that address unrepresented topics outside of philosophy departments (Schnädelbach 1996, cf. for a different context Plant 2017). Reason, as concept or topic, can be either abandoned or 'transformed' into a weak reason or rationality that deals with well familiar phenomena from the everyday life. Both the exclusion of familiar topics and the abandonment of strong, complex concepts violate the legitimate interests of epistemic agents, who turn to philosophy to find answers to pressing questions.

addressed in different ways. The final part elaborates on the notion of topical equilibrium as a philosophical method and norm and discusses two further examples (COW and ARTHRITIS) from contemporary debates in conceptual engineering.

2 Classification of Concepts

Gauker's (2011) book *Words and Images. An Essay on the Origin of Ideas* is an example of the trending focus on well familiar empirical facts and corresponding concepts. He writes:

“In this book, I propose to explain how ideas such as *dog* and *chair* arise in the mind. So my topic is ordinary ideas, such as *dog* and *chair*, not big ideas such as *democracy*, *science* or *the intermittent windshield wiper*” (Gauker 2011, 1).⁵

Let us examine this distinction. It is very clear what a dog and a chair is, we can easily find examples for them if we look around us or take a walk. It is not very challenging and demanding to think of a dog and a chair and to say which features are relevant to identify something as a dog or a chair, as long as there is no special context and no technical knowledge is required. By contrast, it is hard to say what democracy or science is and which requirements should be met to identify something as democracy or science, even in everyday communication processes. Similarly, it is hard to explain what the intermittent windshield wiper is, although one can see one at a car and observe how it works. The classification of concepts into ordinary vs. big does not have much explanatory power and it is easy to see why it does not work well. For example, one can surely have *ordinary* concepts or, in author's terminology, ‘ideas’ of democracy, science, and the intermittent windshield wiper. One can have a simple, ordinary view of democracy without having studied politics and law, and one can have a simple, non-technical understanding of a part of a car. The characterization of dog and chair as being not big ideas seems to work better, but even here: they are big ideas from the anthropological and cultural point of view (think of the domestication of wolves and the invention of chairs).

Although the opposite pair *ordinary vs. big concepts* does not work well, the general intuition seems to be plausible: There are some well familiar and other, more distant concepts. Kant, who perhaps more than anyone else insisted that the proper object of philosophy are concepts, and who therefore developed a systematic doctrine of concepts and analysis (see Lewin 2023a), obviously had a similar intuition. For Kant, dog and chair would be examples of *given empirical concepts*. They are given in experience, and

⁵ ‘Dog’ and ‘chair’, besides ‘cow’ and ‘fish’, are some of the frequently used examples in contemporary philosophy.

formed by the three logical acts of comparison, reflection, and abstraction.⁶ The category of empirical concepts also comprises such concepts as gold and metal. The obvious advantage of dealing with empirical concepts is the possibility to check the content of the concept in the mind against the facts of experience. If the concept of gold as a yellow metal is incorrect, because it will not correspond to objects in experience, it can be corrected. Similarly, Kant would classify the concept of the intermittent windshield wiper as an empirical concept, but rather as *made*, not given. Made empirical concepts are concepts of inventions. They are empirical because the marks or features of the concept in the mind of the developer materialize in the world of experience. By contrast, the concepts of democracy and science would be classified as *given pure concepts*.⁷ Here, by given Kant means given through the nature of reason, as a whole of combined thoughts that spontaneously originate in reason and that a philosopher has to analyze one-by-one. There is a gap between pure and empirical concepts that is deeply rooted within Kant's doctrine of two stems of cognition. The pure concepts are not formed by abstraction from experience, but by acts of pure spontaneity of reason. Different empirically and culturally observable versions of democracy or science, or, to give other examples, of philosophy, virtue, and wisdom, do not entirely correspond to the pure concepts of reason. Kant calls these concepts archetypes, of which different observable materialized versions are ectypes.

Kant's strict categorization of concepts into *empirical and pure* was one of the most important achievements in philosophy. There is obviously a difference between the concept of the color red and the concept of the infinity of the universe (see KrV A320/B377). Thinking of them in terms of empirical versus pure concepts fits the framework and main pillars of the program of transcendental philosophy. However, if we do not ask about the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments and therefore metaphysics, but for a good general categorization of concepts, this distinction has a weak spot. The problems that I see concern the category of pure concepts. Firstly, it is not neutral enough to be accepted by scholars working within different paradigms, such as empiricism or linguisticism.⁸ Secondly, the category of pure concepts is not transparent enough. If there is a strict distinction between empirical and pure concepts with no intermediate classes of concepts, a clear demarcation criterion must be given. But Kant does not provide one. In

6 For the question of concept formation as well as the distinction between different types of concepts and corresponding definitions in Kant see Lewin 2023a, McAndrew 2022, and Beck 1956.

7 In general, by 'pure' Kant understands either not mixed with anything empirical or completely independent from experience. Pure can be representations (which includes concepts as the species) and cognitions. See Michel (2015) and corresponding passages, e.g., KrV A20/B34, KrV A11, KrV B3. In this article, I will use the abbreviation 'KrV' for Kant's first Critique and the original A/B pagination.

8 Whether there are pure concepts is a possible research question. But using 'pure concepts' as a ready-made category for classifying concepts is problematic.

some passages he even claims that there are *degrees of purity* between pure concepts. The 'ladder' of purity can be reconstructed as follows: The concept of God as the sum of all possibilities is the purest (see KrV A568/B596), next come all the other transcendental ideas, followed by simple theoretical ideas, such as 'pure earth' or 'pure air' (KrV A646/B674), the practical ideas such as practical freedom, wisdom, and virtue (see KrV A327-328/B384-385 and A569-571/B597-599) as well as architectonic ideas of different sciences, such as the idea of jurisprudence or philosophy (see KrV A833/B861; Lewin 2020).⁹ The latter are less pure, because they are partially given *in concreto*. Ideas are followed by notions, such as *the substantial*, and notions by categories of the understanding, such as *the substance* (see KrV A320/B376-377). Also, the predicaments, such as *the power*, must be somewhere on the side of the pure concepts. This progression of pure concepts does not harmonize with Kant's understanding of the quality 'pure' as not being mixed with anything empirical and/or being completely independent from experience (see fn. 6).¹⁰ If there are degrees of purity, then to some concepts must correspond more in experience than to others. But the possibility of experiential correspondence contradicts the concept of purity.¹¹ Furthermore, there might be even something corresponding to the purest theoretical idea, idea of God, dependent on the rational agent's conception of God. Even to the Kantian theoretical conception of God as the sum of all possibilities something corresponds in experience, namely at least some part of possibilities that can be perceived in the actual world. For Kant, more spontaneity is required to form a theoretical idea of God than of the concept of the color red. In general, ideas require more spontaneity (see KrV A547/B575; Lewin 2021: 70-92). Differences between concepts can perhaps be recognized by the rational power needed to think them. Some concepts demand more rational work to be formed and held in thought, others less. But Kant's focus on purity prevents him from perceiving it in this manner.

In contemporary work on concepts, perhaps one of the most promising suggestions is to classify concepts into *concrete and abstract*. In psycholinguistics, lay examples of abstract concepts are such concepts as art, democracy, and eternity, while ball, water, and dog are paradigmatic for concrete concepts (see Löhr 2022 and Strik Lievers et al. 2021). Concrete concepts are easy to grasp because they either refer to familiar physical objects or sensorimotor experiences. For example, the concept of running can

9 For the analysis of seven types of ideas in Kant see Lewin 2021.

10 Consider also the Kantian understanding of idea, i.e., pure concept of reason and a concept of a maximum, to which nothing congruent can be given in the senses (KrV A327/B383).

11 One way out of the dilemma is to say that pure concepts are pure concepts, i.e., the category 'pure concept' is itself a pure concept and a regulative idea, to which nothing corresponds. But this would make things even more complicated and still not solve the problem that something that is supposed to be pure is not pure, because something corresponds to it in experience.

be easily understood because one is familiar with this kind of bodily activity. By contrast, democracy is not understandable and explainable by the simple observation of how people go to a polling station. One way to determine whether a concept is concrete or abstract or to test a psycholinguistic theory is to refer to concreteness ratings. A popular source for finding relevant data is the openly accessible *MRC Psycholinguistic Database*.¹² It contains several survey results and one can apply a filter to search for relevant words. The scale of concreteness reaches from 100 for very abstract to 700 for very concrete concepts. For example, the concepts of dog and chair, which Gauker characterizes as ordinary ideas and Kant as empirical concepts, received the value of 610 and 606 out of 700. This means, they are very concrete. The concepts of democracy and science, ‘big ideas’ in Gauker and ‘pure concepts’ in Kant, were rated 298 and 366. They are rather abstract, whereby democracy is more abstract than science. Interestingly, the concept of God received the value of 365, which puts it at the same level with the concept of science. If purity and abstractness correlate, this does not harmonize with Kant’s classification of the concept of God as the epitome of pure concepts.

The opposite pair *abstract and concrete concepts* is not unproblematic. Of course, there are intrinsic problems of the studies (see Löhr 2022: 554–557), for example, the polysemy: A chair could mean a physical object on which one can seat or somebody who moderates a session at a conference. But there is a more fundamental problem—the metatheory of abstract and concrete concepts. Abstraction, from Latin *abstrahere*, to draw away, is often associated with numbers and certain pieces of art. In regard to language and concepts, everything is an abstraction from something: e.g., letters are abstract pictures (the letter ‘A’ originally represents the ox’s head) and concepts represent only chosen features of a totality. Therefore, strictly speaking, each concept is an abstract concept. Concreteness, from Latin *concretus*, grown together, condensed, can be interpreted as the opposite of abstraction, something that is given as a whole that is grown together. The problem is that in psycholinguistics, concreteness and abstractness are regarded as fixed values of fixed concepts. But there is a difference between how individual subjects create and articulate concepts. A person, who actually has a dog and background knowledge in biology, and a person who never had a dog and does not hold a degree in biology will have different concepts of a dog. The results of reconstruction can be measured in terms of abstractness and concreteness. An experienced and biologically educated person will have a more concrete concept of a dog than a person who never had a dog. The unexperienced person will abstract from many concrete features that can be associated with dogs and will have a more abstract concept. The same applies to such concepts as democracy and science. Philosophers of science will have a more concrete concept of science than perhaps scientists themselves. I believe

12 https://websites.psychology.uwa.edu.au/school/MRCDatabase/uwa_mrc.htm (accessed on October 11, 2024).

that such understanding of abstractness and concreteness makes more sense. A thought can be just as concrete as a physical object. It cannot be said that a physical object is more concrete, because what we perceive, e.g., a running dog, is only an external shape. When we explain what is actually happening when a dog is running, which processes, which muscles are involved, we get a more concrete picture of the object in our thought.¹³

The opposite pairs *ordinary vs. big*, *empirical vs. pure*, and *concrete vs. abstract* seem to have something in common. Their proponents follow the intuition that something is more within reach (ordinary, empirical, concrete) than others (big, pure, abstract). Furthermore, they believe that concepts *per se*, independent of the rational agents' mental activities and contexts, have one of the properties from the opposite pair. I think that both beliefs must be corrected. Imagine a situation where a child is pointing at a dog and saying 'dog'. At this moment, the child is articulating what I suggest to call a 'simple empirical concept'. It can be said that this concept is ordinary, but only insofar as the epistemic agent and the context do not change. It is also an empirical concept in the Kantian sense, as dogs are objects of experience. It is, however, not a concrete concept. The actual dog as the object of experience is something concrete, but the child's concept of a dog is rather abstract, it does not have enough knowledge and experience to articulate a systematic and versatile combination of thoughts. By contrast, imagine a philosopher of science thinking of science. Her concept of science is an example for what I suggest to call 'complex demanding concepts'. The philosopher's concept of science is complex and demanding insofar as it contains a large volume of information, which must be internally consistent, but which often is not due to different views of what science is. It takes much time and cognitive effort to think the complex demanding concept of science. In this regard, the characterization of science as a 'big' (Gauker) idea makes sense, but only insofar as the rational agent will not be substituted and the context will not change. The Kantian predicate 'pure' adds little to no explanatory value to the characterization of science as a complex demanding concept in the mind of a philosopher of science.¹⁴ The features 'complexity' and 'demandingness' (which Kant associated with pure concepts, especially ideas of reason) explain good enough that much autonomous rational power is needed to think of a science and that experience (unlike in case of a dog) cannot provide enough assistance in this case. This is also indicated by the omission of the term 'empirical'. The concept of science in the mind of an experienced philosopher of science is rather 'concrete'. Much knowledge and many views, nuances, and aspects are considered in thought.

13 Hegel, in his theory of abstract and concrete thinking, provides good reasons for why thoughts can be either abstract or concrete and how abstract thinking misrepresents people, facts, and reasonable structures (see Lewin 2021. 198-208).

14 I repeat that the option to ask whether there are 'pure concepts' is nevertheless always open. But the use of 'pure concepts' as a ready-made category is too problematic.

My suggestion to classify concepts into simple empirical and complex demanding has three consequences. Firstly, the intuition that something within our reach is rather ordinary, empirical, and concrete, while something more detached is big, pure, and abstract does not correspond to the real state of affairs. For example, some ordinary ideas are actually big depending on the perspective and sometimes we have a rather abstract concept of a thing that we can see or touch. Secondly, 'simple empirical' and 'complex demanding concepts' are best understood as evaluative categories. We cannot assign fixed characteristics to concepts regardless of the performance of the rational agent: concepts are articulated by thinking subjects and therefore dependent on their thinking performance (one can call it 'the subjective view of concepts'). Nevertheless, what we can do is to determine rules for adequate understanding of different objects in thought. For example, we can say that a simple empirical concept of democracy cannot adequately represent the referent and a complex demanding concept of democracy is more adequate. Hence, the complex object (referent) itself may demand a certain level of thinking performance and a rather complex concept (one can call it 'the objective view of concepts'). But in general, each simple concept can be made more complex and vice versa (see 4). Therefore, both the subjective and objective views must be involved in an adequate evaluation of concepts. Thirdly, simple empirical and complex demanding concepts can be considered as two heuristic poles with other options in between. For example, there can be a complex empirical concept of an intermittent windshield viper.

3 The Structure of Concepts: Semantic and Onomantic Perspectives

Before I elaborate on differences between simple empirical and complex demanding concepts, I want to focus on what they share. Given that both belong to the genus of concepts, they must have something in common, namely the general structure of a concept and problems associated with this structure. What do I mean by the general structure of concepts? The question "What are concepts?" is often bypassed, because, understandably, it is very hard to answer. Different options are available. The first option is to leave the concept of concept undefined (cf., e.g., Cappelen 2018: 4, 141). Authors who follow this option may ask the reader to think by concept of something very general, something that will satisfy the largest part of the contemporary communication community. That this strategy does not work shows alone the way how the communication community uses the term 'concepts'. In English and German, for example, both lay people and academics often equate words with concepts (see Vater 1999). They conflate the linguistic level, the word as a lexical, morphological, and syntactical unit, with the mental level, the

concept as a cognitive unit. It is evident from such phrases as ‘He has the concept of democracy on the tip of his tongue’ that it is wrong to equate both levels. How can a mental unit of thoughts on democracy be on the tip of somebody’s tongue? Another option is to distinguish words from concepts and understand concepts as meanings. However, when most philosophers talk about concepts that do not mean the meanings of words. For example, they do not ask what is the meaning of the word ‘democracy’, but what is understood under democracy. To avoid this, one can suggest the distinction between words, meanings, and concepts (for different possible linguistic paradigms, see Strauß 1996). However, the meanings of words are also concepts in a certain way. Some suggest that concepts are meaning-like short descriptions of something, while conceptions are extended descriptions (see, e.g., Sawyer 2020 and Millikan 1998). But this view cannot tell where concepts end and conceptions begin. One can also suggest that there is a difference between the semantic level of meaning and a psychological level. For example, Machery (2017: 210-212) suggests that concepts are psychological entities that are retrieved from the long-term memory. But not all concepts or parts of concepts are stored in the long-term memory. Sometimes, one has to think and create new concepts. One can argue that the characterization of concepts as psychological entities misses the point that concepts are building blocks of thought and therefore cognitive units. It is possible to characterize cognition as a psychological process, but one can also abstract from this and focus only on cognitive content. These examples make clear why some authors refuse to define the notion of concept.

I suggest to distinguish between the lexical, mental, and object levels. The word ‘concept’ comes from the Latin *conceptus* (in Ancient Greek: συλλαμβάνω), something that has been taken hold of and put together, like different ingredients to make a soup. There is a way to apply this original understanding of *conceptus* to the lexical level: Words are obviously speech sounds and letters that have been put together. In this regard, ‘dog’ is a concept because it is composed of the graphemes ‘d’, ‘o’, and ‘g’ and corresponding phonemes. But this is not what those who conflate concepts with words mean by concepts. What they mean is the mental level, the level of thought. A concept at the level of thought is a combination of building blocks. Dependent on the paradigm and research goals, these blocks could be called thoughts, representations, meanings, marks or features. The thoughts refer to different kinds of objects, such as physical objects, processes, psychic states, and thoughts themselves. The word ‘concept’ can be also used at the level of objects, the objects themselves are combinations of elements, like air as a combination of different gases, a living organism, or the process of running. This may sound strange, but it is not strange from the point of view of the original meaning of the term ‘concept’ and, for example, the Hegelian philosophy.

There are two ways of how to understand the relation between these three levels, the lexical, mental, and object levels. One can start either with the lexical level or with the two other levels. The first way is the semantic, the second the onomantic. Semanticism is a new and contemporary prevailing paradigm that appeared in the late 19th century (the term was first mentioned by Bréal in 1883, see Baldinger 1998: 2118). In the epoch of Enlightenment, many lexicographers and philosophers, including Kant, believed that concepts, as mental entities, are more important than verbal signs that express concepts. The latter can be easily replaced. By contrast, semantics focus on signs and their interpretation. In this regard, the category of meaning has gained more weight than the category of concepts, although some scholars equate concepts with meaning. It is also possible to say that the meaning is a short concept, short enough to describe the main features of what a sign stands for and what will be printed in a dictionary. If an extended concept is required one opens a specialized professional dictionary. Basically, all philosophical dictionaries, reference works, and works on the language of philosophy follow the semantic paradigm, even if not all philosophers are happy with the label 'semantics' or 'philosophical semantics' (Bremer 2005), because it is often associated with the ordinary language philosophy. But in fact, even the historians of ideas or historians of concepts are using the same pattern as semanticists. They focus on a term, such as 'philosophy', and track its history, i.e., the meanings and concepts associated with it in the Renaissance or the Middle Ages. Adorno (1974), in his lectures on philosophical terminology, follows the same pattern.

One way to stress the importance of words for concepts as mental units is to speak of lexicalized concepts. Our examples, dog, chair, democracy, science, and intermittent windshield wiper are lexicalized concepts. The words are not irrelevant for the understanding of concepts. They have a certain meaning that can be looked up in a dictionary and fine-tuned, if needed. But what does it mean to focus on words to analyze their meanings? Dictionaries and philosophical analyses of terms often do not pay enough attention to words, for this would mean that the morphology and history of the word formation and meaning would be relevant for the analysis of a term. For example, to analyze the lexicalized concept of democracy, one could analyze the verbal sign. The word is a compound of two morphemes with the Ancient Greek origin, *δῆμος* (*demos*), meaning people, and *-κρατία* (*-kratía*), from *κράτος* (*krátos*), meaning power. This is a part of information that is retrievable from the word in the first place. However, the explanations of meanings and definitions that can be found in dictionaries and that are given by philosophers and politicians exceed this meaning that can be obtained from the analysis of the structure of the word. For example, the Merriam Webster dictionary of English defines democracy as "a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving

periodically held free elections.”¹⁵ The word ‘democracy’ does not contain any information about a system of representation and periodically held free elections. The system of representation even seems to contradict the idea that people have the power, if they are not directly involved in decisions of the representatives of the state. If the words have no or only a little impact on the definition of words in contemporary semantics, then semanticism in truth tacitly shares the view with the older paradigm, according to which words are less important than concepts.¹⁶ Indeed, many contemporary philosophers do not really care for words—for example, when they use the phrase ‘analytic philosophy’, but do not mean that analysis is what they do or when they speak of ‘relativism’ and engineer the meaning of this term in any way they like. It is the reason why Rorty argued that philosophy makes little to no progress and why skepticism towards philosophy is justified. One can take as many different positions as there are possibilities to (re-)define philosophical terms: “we redefine ‘truth,’ ‘fact,’ ‘validity,’ ‘knowledge,’ and the like, and [...] we have the option of redefining them in such a way as to take the wind out of our opponents’ sails” (Rorty 1961: 300).

One possible way to solve this problem is to use different, onomantic heuristics. Onomantic heuristics start with the mental and object levels and look for the right words to fit the object and the thought. The words are in general understood as names. Not as proper names, but as names in general. The established terms are results of earlier processes of naming. This method can be demonstrated by the simple example of a stalagmite cave. Imagine being the first person who sees that what will be later called a stalagmite, a mineral formation that raises from the bottom of the cave. How do you call this formation? Perhaps, you will recognize that it assembles a stone and that this stone is being formed by drops of water that contain minerals from the ceiling of the cave. A possible name would be a ‘drop-stone’. This is a good name, as it is based on careful observation, even if this is a simple observation and does not explain all the relevant scientific facts. Indeed, in German, *Tropfstein*, a ‘drop-stone’, is a synonym for stalagmite. If I am right, there is a similar term in Serbian, ‘Капање’ or ‘Капљичне формације’. The Ancient Greek term itself comes from *σταλαγμίας* (*stalagmías*), dropping, and *-ίτης* (*-itēs*), meaning connected to. Stalagmites are objects that are connected to or result out of a dropping. One can find many illustrative examples to

15 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy> (accessed on October 13, 2024).

16 Cappelen’s (2023) recent suggestion to abandon the term ‘democracy’ because it either has no meaning or refers inconsistently to too many different objects is based on semanticistic assumptions. The inquiry and result could have taken a different shape if the compound ‘democracy’ would be considered as a name of a specific phenomenon or a set of phenomena that can be aligned with the original meanings of *δῆμος* (*demos*) and *-κρατία* (*-kratía*). All phenomena that cannot be aligned should be called by different names or receive different or more specified names (such as ‘representative democracy’). This is what I understand by the onomantic and originalistic perspective in the following (see also the next footnote, the section 5, and the critique of anti-realism).

elaborate on the onomantic perspective in biological characterizations and classifications. Names like ‘tiger leafwing’ and ‘starry night cracker’ can help identify butterflies in a butterfly house even before seeing their pictures.

Many original observations and images that lay the ground for ordinary and technical words and the words themselves are borrowed from earlier communication communities and languages, such as Ancient Greek and Latin. In Platon’s *Cratylus*, the onomantic perspective was a matter of course: Sokrates maieutically suggests that name-givers can be more or less good and reasonable in naming, that good naming involves finding either the most relevant original image or feature on the side of the referent, and that names must be distinguished from concepts. In *Zhuangzi*, names are considered as ‘guests of the reality’: they must be chosen well to be consistent with the reality (cf. Yang 2008). Such perspectives, after over 2000 years of humanity’s intellectual history, with established terminologies, word uses, standardizations, and the prevalence of semanticism, are scarcely implemented. The onomantic heuristics reveal that many words are based on very simple images and that many words that we use are actually metaphors. For example, the word ‘chair’ is originally a compound of κατά (kata, down) and ἕδρα (hedra, back, buttocks). *Concept* is a metaphor, which I have explained earlier, and is based on a familiar act of collecting and getting hold of something. The German word ‘begreifen’ and the English word ‘to grasp’ are based on the same haptic metaphor. The word ‘spirit’ is based on ‘spirare’, to breath, and one can debate whether this is a good name for what theologians and philosophers are referring to.

The onomantic method can be used to check whether the terms currently in use are appropriate names for what is being articulated in thought or referred to as an object. For example, one could ask whether the word ‘democracy’ is a good name for what is actually meant. Sometimes, one can make it more precise by explicitly adding such predicates as ‘direct’ or ‘representative’. But one can go even further and use a different original picture than the power of the people as a source domain of the metaphor and the corresponding linguistic expression. It is hard to find one, but it is possible, if one gives it a try. Sometimes, it helps to compare the original images in different languages. For example, while the English term ‘virtue’ is based on the Latin word ‘vir’, a man—and it is obviously meant that a man is capable of something, and a person who is capable of something is man-like—the German word *Tugend* is based on the adjective *tauglich*, which means suitable or fitting the purpose. Not all men are virtuous, therefore, it seems the German original image and word are a better fit to denote that what is meant to be expressed. The onomantic perspective can help aligning words, concepts, and reality and therefore overcoming the problem of arbitrary redefinitions of terms.¹⁷

17 I have used the onomantic method in metaphilosophy and metaepistemology under the titles ‘linguistic originalism’ and ‘conceptual originalism’ (cf., e.g., Lewin forthcoming 2, 2024, 2023b).

To sum up: I have distinguished between three levels that constitute the structure of any concept: linguistic, mental, and object levels. These levels can be analyzed semantically, starting with the linguistic level, or onomantically, starting with the mental and object levels. In the semantic perspective, both simple empirical and complex demanding concepts are lexicalized and normally, the lexeme should be relevant for the understanding of a concept. As I have shown, this is often not the case, especially with complex demanding concepts. The onomantic perspective has revealed that both names of empirical objects and names of complex concepts are based on metaphors and incomplete original images. Although simple empirical concepts and demanding complex concepts share a common structure and problems associated with this structure, there are important differences between the both poles.

4 Differences Between Simple Empirical and Complex Demanding Concepts?

Due to the elaborated structural similarities, a scholar can use simple empirical concepts to explain what concepts, in general, are. But without the use of complex demanding concepts as examples and case studies, the picture will remain far from complete. There are multiple reasons for this. There are differences in regard to at least four factors: empirical data, identification of the referent, historical and theoretical loadedness, complexity, and demandingness. In the following, I will examine differences between simple empirical and complex demanding concepts using these factors and the structural distinctions that I have made.

As I have argued, the term ‘concept’ perfectly fits to what is meant by ‘thought’. Concepts are combinations of thought. But the original meaning of *conceptus* does not preclude from using it in regard to language and objects in a broad sense, as long as there is something to take hold of and put together. The same applies to empirical data. We can encounter empirical data on all three levels. On the linguistic level, empirical data is, for example, the lexical, morphological, and historical knowledge of words and meanings. This data is being collected in dictionaries, such as etymological dictionaries that analyze original word forms and meanings via historical sources and comparison of languages. On the mental level, the empirical data are the communicable and communicated thoughts that are being collected and discussed throughout history and today. On the object level, the empirical data are physical, psychological, mental, linguistic and other kinds of objects that can be experienced—in difference to objects that are not available.

The empirical data for simple empirical concepts, such as dog and chair, is easy to retrieve. Linguistically, both lexemes are easily understandable and analyzable. There are a lot of entries in dictionaries, but the simplicity

and permanent usage of these words does not require a dictionary lookup. The mental data is also easily retrievable from the long-term memory. If a more professional understanding of dogs is required, there is a lot of easily accessible and empirically verified biological and psychological knowledge of dogs. On the physical level, the empirical data is accessible, even the processes in the brain of a dog can be measured. Given the availability of the empirical data at all the three levels, there is no problem with the identification of the referent. A layperson can recognize differences between a wolfhound and a wolf and between a chair and a stool. In cases of doubt and misunderstanding, the reference can be easily fixed and the meant object can be easily described. The concepts of dog and chair have a long cultural and biological or physical history. They are theoretically and historically loaded, but not in a way that there are substantive debates about what a dog or a chair is. In regard to complexity and demandingness, one should distinguish between different purposes of having the concepts of dog and chair. If the everyday understanding is required, the concepts of dogs and chairs are easy to understand and use. The professional extension and deeper knowledge, however, can turn a simple empirical concept of dog into a more complex one. The level of complexity can rise in studies that ask whether dogs have a human-like consciousness. But even in such studies, the complexity is rising due to additional questions and topics, such as: What is consciousness? Do animals have consciousness? What is a nerve? Which processes are relevant for the use of muscles and the function of the brain? Which impact on the development of brains had the cultivation of wolfs? Hence, simple empirical concepts can be made complex by inquiries made on the base of complex demanding concepts.

Complex demanding concepts, such as science, democracy, or intermittent windshield wiper, unlike simple empirical concepts, more often require a lookup in a dictionary. The lexical forms are often more challenging and have their origins in ancient languages. Furthermore, they are harder to articulate in thought. Firstly, they are often defined in conflicting ways. Secondly, there is often a lot of literature on topics related to complex demanding concepts. A whole discipline may sometimes be needed to understand what a concept is about, such as the philosophy of science, with different discourse formations, base assumptions about what science is, and suggestions to demarcate science from non-science. The problem is also that the word 'science' itself, its Latin form 'scientia', and translation of it in other languages (such as into German with the word 'Wissenschaft', which literally means 'creation of knowledge') does not provide a guiding thread for these discourse formations. If we follow the logic of the name, there can be no doubt about the fact that philosophy is a science, because philosophy articulates and generates knowledge. The prevailing semantic paradigm gives birth to countless discourses about complex demanding concepts that delineate the level of language and the level of thought. This leads to the challenge of finding the reference. For

example, there are numerous attempts at a definition of relativism. And most of them are not based on what the word itself suggests, namely the act of relation of something to something. If one follows the logic of the lexeme, everyone is a relativist, because everyone relates something to something. But philosophers suppose, e.g., that if something is relative to something, it has no absolute validity, which leads to an indifferentism. All this is not a part of the name 'relativism'. It is a construction that deserves a different name. The problem runs even deeper if one tries to use this mental construction to look for relativists in the history of philosophy. Some suggest that the Pyrrhonists can be labeled relativists (see Baghrarian and Coliva 2019: 29-32). But this is a wrong assumption given that relativity was one of the five or, respectively, ten tropes to fight the arguments of the dogmatists. And relativity—without the suffix '-ism'—meant for them that what the word says, namely, literally, the relation of something to something. The ataraxia was a primary attitude, the trope of relation one of the many tropes to support this attitude. If one looks for the relativist as a mental construction in contemporary epistemology in the history philosophy, one should—like the well-known cynic—take a lantern in one's hand, and one probably will not find the real one.

One further difference to the simple empirical concepts are the historical and theoretical changes. For example, chairs, as artefacts, did no change as much as the understanding of philosophy, science, and democracy. One can design different kinds of chairs and use various materials to build them, but in general, a chair remains a chair. Philosophy, however, underwent serious changes in the course of history. From the mother of all sciences, to a particular science, until it was even banned from science with the coming of the exact sciences. The complex demanding concepts are historically and theoretically loaded and require much work: much reading and learning, a clear orientation and understanding. Their complexity demands more time and effort, perhaps also more epistemic autonomy, because orienting oneself requires prioritization and heuristics, if definitions of complex demanding concepts are not per se valid for everyone. Just as simple empirical concepts can become more complex by addition of complex heuristics, complex demanding concepts can become simpler. For example, one can describe a complex demanding concept by using a metaphor or allegory. But such simplifications are only of a limited use, for example for didactical purposes.

5 Topical Equilibrium in Philosophy

Philosophical diversity is a problem to anyone who wants to delimit the concept of philosophy. The more one knows about philosophy, its nature, questions, methods, and contemporary and historical discourse formations, the harder it gets to define it. Many experienced scholars give up attempts at strict definitions of the term 'philosophy':

In earlier periods, I sometimes made attempts to give an explication of the term “philosophy”. The domain of those problems which I proposed to call “philosophical” became step by step more comprehensive... Yet actually none of my explications seemed fully satisfactory to me even when I proposed them; and I did not like the explications proposed by others any better. Finally, I gave up the search... it is unwise to attempt such an explication because each of them is more or less artificial. It seems better to leave the term “philosophy” without any sharp boundary lines (Carnap, 1963, 862).

The problem with the unclear meaning and extension of ‘philosophy’ can be traced back to the introduction and first uses of this compositum in the Ancient Greece. If ‘sophia’, a word with an etymology that has yet to be clarified, stands for many different kinds of knowledge and skill (as it was originally used by Homer, Xenophanes, Pindar, Democritus, et al.: a ‘sophoi’ is, e.g., a helmsman who is well familiar with the directions of the wind and can skillfully navigate the stormy seas), then any attempt at delimiting its use, however well justified, is a perspectival stipulation. The only way to avoid stipulations is a neutral classification of philosophically relevant objects and a corresponding taxonomy of philosophical fields and disciplines.

One can agree with Rescher (2014, 39-61) that taxonomies are themselves perspectival: “the traditional project of specifying *the* taxonomy of philosophy has reached its natural end with the ongoing development of the subject itself” (ibid., 60). Librarianship, bookstore displays, course programming, historiography, and research can require and operate with different taxonomies. Older classical taxonomies, such as Cassiodorus’ (485-580), according to whom music is a part of theoretical philosophy in the narrower sense and economical philosophy is subordinated to practical philosophy, seem surprising from the contemporary point of view. In turn, contemporary subdivisions of philosophy integrate new fields of study, such as the philosophy of AI. Regardless of the specific purposes and structures of philosophical taxonomies as well as understandings of philosophy, taxonomists share one goal: an adequate overview over the existing objects and fields of philosophical inquiry. They take a truly metaphilosophical stance, i.e., they go beyond their individual interests in a specific topical field and examine philosophy itself. Even course programming at narrowly specialized departments requires such a stance if they want to provide their students with deep philosophical knowledge.

The topical balance is a virtue that is shared among systematic philosophers, such as Kant and Hegel. A true scholar, in the older radical sense, is a universal scholar. Philosophers, to get sufficient acknowledgment, had to be versed in many areas and therefore deal with different objects and appropriate methods. This is one of the reasons why Kant did not simply inquire into pure concepts and methods to work with them, but also handled

empirical concepts and corresponding methods and topics. Hegel, in his metaphilosophically most relevant work *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*, discussed the breathing, planets, plants, the skill of the body to play a series of notes, and the imagination of being a dog among all the other philosophically relevant concepts, such as causality, reason, family, state, and philosophy.

As Friedrich Ueberweg (1871, 5) noted, any attempt at restricting philosophy to one of its fields neither corresponds to the universal character of such big systems as the Kantian or Hegelian nor provides a reliable norm for its historiography. One can add that any personal or collective restriction or a ‘hyperfocus’ on specific topics and examples does not correspond to the universal character of philosophy in general and cannot contribute to the progress in philosophy in the long run. Given the widespread abandonment of the ideal of universal scholarship, diversity, and continuous specialization in philosophy, topical equilibrium—that was a matter of course for Kant and Hegel—must become a subject of explicit metaphilosophical deliberations.

‘Topical equilibrium’ can be understood both as a philosophical method and a norm. The method consists in using various topics, examples or case studies from heterogeneous topical fields to develop and review a philosophical theory. For example, Koch’s (2021) recently discussed ‘dual content view’ suggests that concepts are “abstract types of mental representations” (ibid., 1966) that contain two contents. The ‘cognitive content’ (‘c-content’) consists of mental states that enable a rational agent to use a certain word to express the concept. The ‘referential content’ (‘r-content’) is the extension of the concept, which enables mental states that dispose a rational agent to use a certain word to express the concept. To illustrate this difference, Koch uses the lexicalized concept COW (ibid.). C-content of the concept COW are a set of beliefs about cows. Sets of beliefs may vary from person to person: a person who lives at a farm has a different set of beliefs about cows than a person who does not. If the c-content is not deficient, cows are kinds and the actual causal source of mental states, ergo: cows are the r-content of the concept COW. As examples of concepts, to which the ‘dual content view’ applies, Koch mentions “COW, DOG, FISH, WATER, DESK, KNOWLEDGE, WOMAN, or PARENT” (ibid.). This clearly shows that topical balance played no role in the construction of the theory and its illustration. Firstly, all examples (with exception of KNOWLEDGE) and the explanations of the concepts were at the level of simple empirical concepts. Secondly, no line has been drawn between simple empirical and complex demanding concepts. It is not clear if and how the theory can be applied to professional knowledge and professional debates about, e.g., the biology and classification of cows, and/or concepts that demand complex explanations, such as PHILOSOPHY, VIRTUE, REASON, CAUSALITY, and INFINITE UNIVERSE. The latter constitute different topical fields that challenge the initial theory and its fitness for complex operations with concepts. For example, Koch claims (ibid.

and 1972) that r-content can be preserved despite of changes or disagreement regarding c-content. However, the concept SOPHIA (see the beginning of this section) exemplifies that one cannot alter c-content without changing, even if it is a slight change, the r-content. It is thereby not clear what the referent of the r-content is: it may be a mix of physical objects, persons, history, and different kinds of representations that share a part of conceptual marks with SOPHIA. Koch's theory also does not explain why we choose a certain lexeme to lexicalize a concept, which is far more important if professional knowledge, i.e., complex demanding concepts are involved. In philosophy alone, there are extensive debates about naming, terminology, and the language of philosophy in general—the situation with the word-concept relation is by far more complex than it may seem (see section 3 of this article). Koch's 'dual content view' can be used to give a first, preliminary analysis of everyday language use, i.e., to 'scratch the surface', and perhaps it is its only purpose. It is too simple to explain even the everyday language use that can involve by far more causal factors and it is even more far from explaining the use of COW as a more complex concept by a biologist, who knows that there are over 800 breeds of cattle worldwide.

Consider also Sawyer's (2020) example of the concept ARTHRITIS. Sawyer uses this concept to explain the difference between concepts and conceptions. A patient believes that arthritis can occur both in muscles and joints, while a doctor explains to them that it can occur only in joints. The patient and the doctor "are assumed to possess the very same concept, *arthritis*, despite having different associated conceptions of arthritis" (ibid., 1008; cf. Burge 1993, 320, 323). According to Sawyer, this counts as genuine disagreement, because the beliefs are related to the same concept. *Concept* is therefore the category that enables topic preservation. Like in Koch's case, Sawyer uses the concept ARTHRITIS at the level of simple empirical concepts, i.e., at the level of a competent speaker of English. The situation with the concept-conception distinction looks different if we take the perspective of a doctor, who discusses the concept ARTHRITIS with other doctors or a medicine student—hence, if we use complex demanding concepts to develop our philosophical theory about concepts. If two professionals have a debate about arthritis, it may be that not the concept ARTHRITIS itself guarantees topic preservation, but the object of inquiry or a set of physical phenomena, while concepts of arthritis remain distinct in the minds of discussants (see Lewin forthcoming 1). The use of further examples of complex concepts from different topical fields, including the history and variety of uses of 'concept' (see section 3), will further destabilize the theory.

Both Koch and Sawyer could have made use of topical equilibrium as a method to develop, analyze, and calibrate their philosophical theories about concepts. However, they have decided, like many contemporary philosophers, to stick to discussions of simple empirical concepts. The fact that Kant—in the first *Critique*, in his lectures on logic that he held for over 40 years,

and other works—reflected on conceptual practices in regard to different kinds of concepts, and therefore tacitly adhered to topical equilibrium and developed by far more complex theories of mental states, intension, extension, reference, analysis, formation, concept change, word-concept relation, nominal and real concepts, etc. (Lewin 2023a and forthcoming 1) that have in many respects more explanatory power, raises doubts about progress in philosophy. In Lewin forthcoming 1, I use the Kantian distinction between real and nominal concepts to discuss contemporary conceptual practices. It also can be used to further elaborate on the distinction between *simple empirical* and *complex demanding concepts*. Real concepts are concepts of things, they are directed at our best knowledge of an object in perception and/or thought. Nominal concepts are basically explanations of word meanings. The explanations of meanings of ‘cow’, ‘dog’, ‘chair’, ‘intermittent windshield viper’, ‘arthritis’, ‘democracy’, ‘science’, and ‘philosophy’ can be simple, dependent on the purpose of communication. Not all competent speakers are biologists, doctors, political scientists, and philosophers. But why does the understanding of words by non-professionals matter more as an object of philosophical investigation than conceptual practices that are directed at complex understanding of such objects? The latter deserve to be treated in their own right. One cannot develop a strong theory of concepts, conceptualization, and change of concepts without analyzing the practices of complex conceptualizations of those who want to know what a cow, arthritis, or democracy really are. If non-professional interlocutors debate about whether ‘Mars was always either dry or not dry’ (cf. Williamson 2022, 26) or whether ‘freedom is the ability to do what one wants or the ability to ultimately originate one’s choices’ (cf. Chalmers 2011, 532), their concepts are too underdeveloped to serve as lay examples for analyses of linguistic and conceptual practices of professionals. As Chalmers himself notes, “to answer the hardest questions about freedom, one still needs to determine the nonlinguistic properties of freedom” (ibid., 541), one needs to perform a conceptual work that goes beyond the identification of a ‘bedrock concept’ (ibid., 552) or a ‘simple concept’ (see Lewin and Williamson 2023, 57). The question “What is freedom, actually?” requires systematic knowledge and analyses, i.e., a complex demanding concept of freedom. The focus on nominal concepts within the paradigm of ordinary language philosophy and semanticism leads to shortcomings in philosophical debates about concepts. This includes a certain form of anti-realism, as nominal concepts and simple concepts can neither give a proper representation of objects in question nor serve as lay examples for the analysis of what professionals, e.g., philosophers, are doing and have always been doing. The onomantic and originalistic method that has been partially used and described in the current article, works with a balanced structure (the alignment of word, concept, and reality) that considers both real and nominal dimensions of concepts.

The principle of topical equilibrium could be also used as a regulative norm. Given the rising importance of philosophy as a social enterprise, it is important that scholars learn to reflect on their development of theories and selection of topics in a way that does not exclude other potentially important theories and topics. The ‘hyperfocus’ on simple empirical concepts excludes a number of scholars, schools, and traditions that could contribute to the improvement of theory. The social power exercised by certain philosophical groups can make some movements and discourses appear successful, while from a more distanced theoretical viewpoint, they can seem to suffer from serious shortcomings. The work on the theoretical sociology of knowledge that has been done by Fleck and Lakatos in philosophy of science must be done in metaphilosophy (Lewin 2021).

6 Conclusion

As I have shown, the use of opposite pairs *ordinary vs. big* (Gauker 2011), *empirical vs. pure* (Kant), and *concrete vs. abstract* (contemporary psycholinguistics), in the way they are used or have been used, cannot lead to a precise classification of concepts. Besides of the problems discussed in detail, I have noted that the belief that what we find easily accessible is typically ordinary, empirical, and concrete, while what seems more distant is big, pure, and abstract does not accurately reflect the actual state of affairs. Certain ordinary concepts can actually be considered big depending on one’s viewpoint, and at times, we might have an abstract understanding of something that is tangible or visible. Furthermore, both simple empirical concepts and complex demanding concepts serve as evaluative categories. We cannot attribute fixed values to concepts without considering the actions of the rational agent. However, it makes sense to establish guidelines for appropriately comprehending various objects in thought. For example, a simple empirical concept of democracy fails to adequately capture its referent, whereas a more complex demanding concept of democracy provides a better representation. Overall, any simple concept has the potential to be elaborated into a more complex one and vice versa. Lastly, simple empirical and complex demanding concepts can be viewed as two heuristic extremes, with a range of alternatives in between.

I have identified three levels that form the foundation of any concept: linguistic, mental, and object levels. The lexeme ‘concept’, if one goes back to the linguistic and metaphoric origin of the term, can refer to any unit that is based on an accessible combination of something (a word, thoughts, an object in space and time). Typically, scholars refer ‘concept’ to the mental level, although they often conflate the linguistic and mental levels and equate ‘words’ with ‘concepts’. The three levels can be examined from a semantic standpoint, beginning with the linguistic level, or from an onomantic standpoint, starting

with the mental and object levels. From a semantic viewpoint, both simple empirical and complex demanding concepts are expressed through language, and ideally, the lexeme should aid in understanding the concept (thoughts and object). However, as I have demonstrated, this is frequently not the case, particularly with complex demanding concepts. The onomantic perspective has shown that both the names of empirical and complex concepts often derive from metaphors and simple original images. I have reached the conclusion that simple empirical and complex demanding concepts share a similar structure and problems associated with this structure.

As detailed in the last two parts of the article, structural similarities cannot justify the one-sided fixation on simple demanding concepts. Simple empirical and complex demanding concepts cannot be treated alike due to differences in regard to the availability of empirical data, identification of the referent, historical and theoretical loadedness, complexity, and demandingness. The article recommends topical equilibrium as a method and a norm. The trending focus on well familiar empirical facts and simple empirical concepts can result only in an incomplete philosophy and methodology, as shown in the last part. This cannot satisfy the ordinary and professional interest in complex demanding concepts. Philosophers and/or the philosophical community should hold balance between the relevant topics by examining all classes of concepts and developing corresponding methods to treat them. Complex demanding concepts require more rational activity, autonomy, methodological reflections, and continuous research. Hence, philosophers who work on complex concepts must have at least as much support as those who 'philosophically prepare' familiar empirical facts. In my current assessment, there are not enough contemporary discourse formations on various questions related to the wide range of complex demanding concepts, and therefore, there is no topical equilibrium. Discourses are centered around nominal concepts and popular topics, while many theoretically relevant questions, e.g., those from classical German philosophy, are treated only exegetically and historically (see Lewin 2024 for an alternative approach).

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