Concepts, Damned Concepts and Governance

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Abstract
Over the past twenty years ‘governance’ has become a ubiquitous term within a wide range of disciplines, so much so that for many disciplines it has become elevated to key concept status. Scholars from quite diverse disciplines make use of the term, giving little thought to the conceptual price that might have to be paid in consequence of giving it a new home within their particular disciplinary discourse. Yet within the voluminous literature generated by the term, there is little or no consideration given to this issue, even when scholars claim to be offering a theoretical account of it. What passes for theorising ‘governance’ usually amounts to surveying competing uses of the term, as if identifying a term’s meanings from its various uses amounts to adequate conceptual analysis. At best, this is a representational strategy that has its own problems. Despite claiming to explicate the meaning(s) of ‘governance’, a concept, these surveys rapidly become accounts of governance, a practice. An ambiguity emerges between concept and practice, between idea and reality, an ambiguity that raises questions about the ontological commitments arising from the use of the concept. Discursive uses of concepts involve a double claim, one about what is real and the other about how we should interpret that reality. Thus it needs to be asked what is the reality (or understanding of reality) that ‘governance’, as a theoretical term, brings into being within whatever discourse it is inserted? Yet this question cannot even be answered within the current governance scholarship because the problem of theorising the term remains to be developed. The paper aims to take a few tentative steps in that direction, towards a more adequate theoretical analysis of the term ‘governance’.

Key words: concept, discourse, governance, ontology, ontological commitments, theory.

Introduction
Within contemporary scholarship ‘governance’ enjoys significant theoretical and institutional authority as a concept, as is demonstrated by its inclusion in Blackwell’s Key Concept Series (Kjaer 2004). It could be said that ‘governance’ is “a powerful idea being molded before our very eyes” (Hacking 1999, 127). While Hacking was referring to an entirely different term/concept (‘child-abuse’) in another context (an explication of ‘kind-making’), his general insight is apposite because there is no denying that ‘governance’ is a powerful term that has been, and continues to be, formed “before our very eyes”. Yet despite this phenomenon, and the concept’s ubiquitous presence within contemporary discourses, there is surprisingly little that could said to be a conceptual analysis of the term.

A concept is more than a synonym for an idea, and concepts are more than just sophisticated ways of referring to or representing ideas. Concepts are also constitutive and transformative. A concept like ‘governance’ is constitutive terms because it appears within numerous diverse fields of scholarship and analysis as a means to harness and mobilise other concepts and ideas to form particular knowledges and understandings. It is transformative in the sense that it transforms other terms, practices, institutions, and even people, or some combination thereof, a view to be found with increasing regularity within the governance literature (eg Duffield 2007; Harrison 2004; Kettl 2000; Kohler-Koch 1994; Kooiman 1993; Rhodes 1997). In reciprocal fashion ‘governance’ itself is also subject to transformation and hence it both moulds and is moulded by other concepts, practices and institutional locations.
At play here is an ambiguity between ‘governance’ understood as a concept, and ‘governance’ understood as a practice, an ambiguity that could be described as a slippage between concept and practice. For some scholars this ambiguity amounts to an “asymmetry between applications and interrogations of governance” (Walters 2004, 28). However, this ambiguity is not merely a problem of asymmetry, nor is it one of distinguishing adequately “between applications and interrogations”. The problem goes deeper, to the roots of the ontological commitments generated by the deployment of ‘governance’ within any given discourse. Walters seemed to recognise this ontological problem when he suggested a need to interrogate the “unspoken tacit presuppositions which attach to the discourse of governance” (Walters 2004, 28). That is, the problem would appear to involve an interrogation of the ontological presuppositions or commitments of ‘governance’.

All theories (and discourses) have ontological presuppositions or ontological commitments. By ontological commitments is meant the idea that all theories (and discourses) posit particular understandings of whatever is taken to be reality, an understanding built up from particular arrangements of, and interplay between, its concepts or theoretical terms. Some of these terms will serve as basic concepts that effectively distinguish the theory from other theories using the same or similar terms, but in a different conceptual configuration. In this respect basic concepts exercise a degree of conceptual hegemony over the other theoretical terms to give a theory its identity and its articulation of whatever it posits as real. These arrangements mean that a theory will always exhibit, strongly or weakly as the case may be, a double claim: one about what is real and the other about how we should understand the nature of that reality (Jose 1995, 21). Whatever it is that a theory posits as (its particular) knowledge, and however it might be produced, that “knowledge implies a set of ontological decisions; what does exist, and what does not exist; what is present as an object, and what is absent?” (Bartelson 1995, 6).

Yet such conceptual interrogation is easier said than done. If one consults any of the oft-cited authorities within governance scholarship on the meaning(s) of ‘governance’ there very quickly emerges a sense of unease about the conceptual adequacy of these accounts. These discussions turn out to be less than satisfactory because few, if any, could be described as attempts to theorise ‘governance’, if by ‘theorise’ is meant an analysis of the term’s conceptual boundaries and presuppositions. Though some of these discussions appear in articles and books with chapter/sub-section headings such as ‘a theory of governance’ or ‘the meanings of governance’, at best they offer surveys discussing competing uses as distinct from conceptual analysis. A possible exception to this general pattern might be Dixon & Dogan’s (2002) discussion that at least recognises the need to probe the philosophical bases or presuppositions of our understandings of ‘governance’. Even in instances where it is claimed that this is what is being attempted (eg Walters 2004), the outcome is not particularly satisfactory, especially if one is interested in gaining an understanding of the term’s theoretical or conceptual adequacy within the discourses or theories in which it is required to operate.

Consequently this paper aims to provide a first step towards a more adequate conceptual analysis of ‘governance’. The paper therefore begins with a brief overview of some of the most commonly cited authorities on ‘governance’. As will be shown, a common feature of these sources is the unacknowledged shift between ‘governance’
as a concept and ‘governance’ as a practice, paralleling (though not necessarily causally related to) a conflation of ‘discourse’ with ‘theory’. That is, there is a further ambiguity or slippage in which ‘discourse’ and ‘theory’ are used as interchangeable terms. Hence the next section aims to provide a conceptual demarcation between these two terms. That is followed by discussion of concepts and their place within theory with a view to gaining some leverage over the practice of theorising or conceptualising. Thus the central problematic for this paper could be summed up as an attempt to explore ways of conceptualising governance that does not merely see the concept as a representation of its alleged meanings within whatever theory, discourse or practice it appears.

**Theorising ‘Governance’**

In what follows the principal concern is to demonstrate that there is a general pattern in the literature in which scholars claim to be presenting analyses of the concept ‘governance’, that is to be engaging in theorising or conceptualising. The concern is not to survey what various scholars have claimed might be the meanings of ‘governance’; nor is it to engage in critical analysis of their particular positions as to those meanings, contested though they might be. Rather, the task is to identify briefly instances where scholars explicitly indicate that they are “theorising” ‘governance’ in the sense of promising an analysis that explores the theoretical or conceptual underpinnings of the term, the “unspoken tacit presuppositions” of the term (Walters 2004, 28). Granted, it may be that some, or even all, of these scholars might say that when they are talking about ‘theorising’ or engaging in ‘conceptualising’, that their use of such terminology is merely a somewhat loose way of speaking about their considerations on ‘governance’. Yet this would seem to be an untenable dodge. We are entitled to expect that when a scholar claims to be engaging in “theorising” or “elaborating the concept” or “conceptualising” then the choice of terminology is itself meaningful and that such descriptive or scaffolding words are being used with some precision. Indeed the choice of such terminology is also part of, or at least contributes to, the construction of an explanation’s ontological commitments or presuppositions. A further problem that also within this literature is that there is also another ambiguity or slippage in which ‘discourse’ and ‘theory’ are used as interchangeable terms, a point to be addressed later.

Scholars and others began to make use ‘governance’ with increasing frequency towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s (Jose 2007), but it was not until the latter half of the 1990s that its rapid proliferation signalled a need to pay closer attention to its conceptual status. However, almost without exception these discussions focused on competing definitions and meanings. Early definitions provided by the World Bank (1992), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 1994, UNDP 1995a, UNDP 1995b, UNDP 1997), or those adopted by international relations scholars like Roseau & Czempiel (1992) remained largely operational and did not venture into theoretical analysis of the concept itself. Of some interest here is UNDP (1997) because its title, *Reconceptualising Governance*, might lead one to expect some theoretical engagement with the concept of ‘governance’, especially as its opening chapter is entitled “Concepts of Governance and Sustainable Development”. However, differs from the World Bank’s (1992) operational definition of ‘governance’ only with its more explicit emphasis on human rights and “public participation, accountability and transparency” (UNDP 1997, x, 9). In fact the discussion paper assumes that the concept is not in need of conceptual interrogation
because the discussion begins by asserting that good or “sound governance is essential”, and that the real focus is “good governance” (UNDP 1997). In short, its “reconceptualization” is concerned with ‘governance’ the practice, not the concept.

A more promising collection of political science essays (Kooiman 1993) published at about the same time presented various discussions about new ways of governing that the contributors (or editor) labelled ‘modern governance’. There was an identified section consisting of three essays grouped under the heading “Conceptualizatons” that opened with the claim that the “chapters are of a predominantly conceptual nature” and “set the tone for the conceptions developed in the book” (Kooiman 1993, 7). While these and the other essays contained therein certainly engaged in considerable discussion of a conceptual nature, the concept ‘governance’, as distinct from the practice of governance, was not the focus. There was no discussion of the concept ‘governance’ qua concept, beyond the specification of how it might be defined operationally.

In the mid-1990s one of the leading governance scholars suggested that there were “at least six separate uses of governance” (Rhodes 1996, 653). While the context of his discussion pointed to the uses of the concept ‘governance’, he could also be interpreted as referring to governance, the practice; and indeed, in the discussion that followed this latter interpretation was the direction taken. These meanings have formed the core of his interpretation in his subsequent work (eg Rhodes 1997), gaining a slight update in Bevir & Rhodes (2003, 77-83) as they sought to “decentre the governance narrative” (Bevir & Rhodes 2003, 77). In this latter work they were concerned to argue about what they saw as a deficiency within the existing governance literature, namely the “pervas [ive] … positivism characteristic of British political science” (Bevir & Rhodes 2003, 77). Their concern was not with the concept ‘governance’, but with the various narratives of governance, and hence their approach remained focused on explaining governance as a practice as distinct from engaging in a conceptual analysis of the term. The point in highlighting Rhodes’ contributions (and his subsequent collaboration with Bevir) is that it (in particular their six or seven meanings of ‘governance'/governance) has become a touchstone for subsequent discussions of the term within political science. Thus, for example, key works like Kooiman (1999), Pierre & Peters (2000), Hill & Hupe (2002), Kjaer (2004), and Newman (2005a) all take Rhodes’ 1996 and 1997 contributions as their starting point.

Consider Pierre & Peters’ Governance, Politics and the State (2000) as a case in point. They devoted a whole chapter to what a reader might take to be a conceptual analysis of ‘governance’ given that the chapter bore the title “Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives on Governance”. It then opened with a promise to “elaborate the nature of the concept of governance and particularly the variety of theoretical perspectives in the social sciences that can be brought to bear on this subject” (Pierre & Peters 2000, 28). While they certainly elaborated the “theoretical perspectives … that can be brought to bear” they spent little or no time elaborating the “nature of the concept of governance”. While using phrases like the “governance concept” (Pierre & Peters 2000, 30) and noting that it is a “useful concept” (Pierre & Peters 2000, 37), the discussion in the section of the chapter labelled “Theories of governance” quickly turned into a survey of the “varieties of governance approaches” (Pierre & Peters 2000, 37). And that is where the discussion remained for the rest of the chapter, and indeed for the book as a whole. The principal concern was with the processes of
governance as they pertain to governing, political rule and the changing nature and role(s) of the state. There was no interrogation of ‘governance’ as a concept, as a theoretical term.

Or consider work of Kjaer (2004) and Newman (2005a) which similarly promised an analysis of ‘governance’ the concept, yet both almost immediately shifted into discussions of definitions and their applications, in effect discussing various approaches to governance practice. Given that Kjaer’s study forms part of a Key Concept series and that she stated explicitly that the purpose of her “book is to give sense to the concept of governance”, one would expect there to be a high premium on conceptual analysis. However, after noting that “there is not one coherent body of governance theory”, and that the concept is used in “many different contexts and with as many different meanings”, she stated that she would make sense of the concept “by introducing the many ways in which it is used and by sketching the many different theoretical debates lying behind these ways” (Kjaer 2004, 2). In this manner her book examined “governance theory” and what she noted were its “core concepts” such as “legitimacy, efficiency, democracy and accountability” (Kjaer 2004, 11). However, explicating “governance theory” is not the same as explicating ‘governance’. Similarly, the essays in Newman (2005a) were also concerned with “governance theory”, but from the perspective of exploring “the dynamics of remaking governance” in the sense of exploring how “new strategies of governance rest on cultural projects concerned with peoples and publics as governable entities” (Newman 2005b, 7. Her emphasis). A central concern for the project as a whole was with “rethinking key concepts – ‘states’, ‘citizens’, ‘democracy’, ‘representation’, ‘participation’, and so on” (Newman 2005b, 7). There are two points to note here. First, ‘governance’ was not on the list of concepts being rethought, and hence was somehow exempt from conceptual analysis. Second, the fact that Newman placed single quotation marks around the terms being rethought indicated her awareness of the distinction between a concept and the object or focus of its reality. However, that awareness was not applied to ‘governance’.

One further example of this pattern of theorising is a recent essay entitled “Modes of Governance: Towards a Conceptual Clarification”. Both its title, abstract and stated aims would lead the reader to expect something approximating a conceptual analysis. The authors situated their discussion in the context of “an intense debate over ‘governance’ and the changing ‘modes of governance’” (Treib, Bähr & Falkner 2007, 1), and they stated explicitly that the “aim of the paper is to clarify the two core concepts at the heart of this debate, notably ‘governance’ and ‘modes of governance’” (Treib, Bähr & Falkner 2007, 2). The section dealing with explicating the concept of ‘governance’ focused on definitions that were grouped under three analytical categories (“Politics’, ‘Polity’, and ‘Policy’) which Treib et al suggested captured the three dominant ways of understanding the term. This then became their framework for a discussion of the various ‘modes of governance’, with no further conceptual discussion of the key term ‘governance’. For the reader, the promised conceptual analysis or clarification failed to materialise, as it does for all of the examples discussed above. A major reason for this would appear to be a consequence of the cavalier way in which claims to ‘theorising’ and ‘conceptualising’ are expressed and the loose ways in which ‘discourse’ and ‘theory’ are used. Hence, these two terms now need to be given closer analysis.
Considerations on ‘Discourse’ and ‘Theory’
The terms ‘theory’ and ‘discourse’ have been marked with single quotation marks to indicate a separate and distinct theoretical status within the argument being developed in this paper. In particular they signal that these terms should not be understood as interchangeable. At an everyday level of understanding ‘discourse’ and ‘theory’ are often treated interchangeably, but conceptual analysis is of a different order. Granted, both ‘discourse’ and ‘theory’ can be understood as ways of creating meaning through the systematic organisation of their particular signifiers (understood to encompass linguistic and other forms of signs) in a regularised manner; both encompass acts of writing or semiotic expression involving the articulation of words or signs or concepts in a systematic or regularised manner. In this respect they are a means of making sense of whatever issue, event or phenomenon that might be the focus of attention.

One way of understanding the idea of making sense, of ‘sense-making’, is that it is a process of “taking a more or less inchoate bundle of events and processes—what might be thought of as a situation or group of situations—and putting a frame around them based on more or less conscious assumptions about what is likely to be important, significant or meaningful” (Stivers 2000, 132). For many political scientists the framework metaphor is a key way of understanding what enables a series of linguistic signs to be regarded as a theory (Sayer 1992, 50). Yet the notion of “sense-making” is not as straightforward as it might seem. As soon as we ask the awkward question of what sort of sense is being made, or perhaps even more pointedly, whose sense is being made, the idea that discourses or theories enable something we term ‘sense’ to be made of something or other is no longer self-explanatory. In addition, even if we accept the idea that a theory offers us “an ordering-framework” we might ask why the “ordering” that is presented takes this form rather than some other form.

One way around this might be to invoke a Foucauldian interpretation of discourse as regularised and regulated “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972, 49; 1970a; 1970b). In this way the ordering articulated within a discourse or theory is a consequence of the discursive practices of the discourse or theory in question. And insofar as each provides particular ways of making sense of the world according to the “objects of which they speak”, each contributes to the construction of particular realities. Nonetheless, answers to the questions of whose or what ‘sense’ is being made are not necessarily given by the theory, indeed they may even be so taken for granted by the theory as to be invisible. Rather, such answers can often only be found by exploring the extra-theoretic domain within which the theory finds expression. This would suggest that here is a crucial difference between ‘discourse’ and ‘theory’, namely that the cues as to these extra-theoretic issues are to be found outside the theory itself. This is one of the major differences between discourse and theory.

Related to this is a second major difference. A discourse is likely to cover far more of the conceptual terrain than any given theory, since the theories are likely to be much narrower in focus and more tightly ordered with respect to their key concepts, derived concepts, and the relations between them. For example, there might be many theories of ‘governance’ (understood as a concept) or theories of governance (understood as a practice), and they might all be regarded as being constitutive of what might be labelled or recognised as ‘governance discourse’. The latter (‘governance discourse’)
provides the discursive domain in which and through which the former (theories of ‘governance’/governance) can be articulated, contested, understood, and acted upon.

A further difference is that a discourse constitutes, as Flax has suggested, “a system of possibilities for knowledge” (Flax 1990, 205). Flax was drawing on Foucault’s notion of a discursive formation, a specific configuration of “objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices” (Foucault 1972, 38) organised according to formal and informal rules and practices. These rules guide the inclusion, exclusion, modification and so forth of these constitutive aspects or “elements”. In consequence,

All discursive formations simultaneously enable us to do certain things and confine us within a necessarily delimited system. ‘Truth’ is simply an effect of the rules of discourse. Because there are no non-discourse-generated rules, there is no external standpoint from which we can claim to judge the truth, falsity, or ‘adequacy’ of a discourse in its entirety (Flax, 1990, pp. 205-6).

While Flax was pointing to the epistemological problem of demarcating how we might distinguish true from false, her point has relevance for ontological considerations, insofar as “knowledge implies a set of ontological decisions” (Bartelson 1995, 6). Whatever it is that is claimed to be real, to constitute reality, is only knowable through the particular language of discourse (or theory) being used. It is in this sense that the key concepts of a discourse or theory (and the theoretical relations between the concepts and theories/discourses) can be said to exhibit ontological commitments.

It might be objected that a theory also could be understood as “a system of possibilities for knowledge”. However, there are two points to be made against this. One relates to what has been said above in that any given theory will presuppose a discursive context within which it operates, a context not necessarily limited to or constrained by the theory itself or its constitutive terms. In this respect the discursive context will be a condition of a theory’s “possibilities”. Second, a theory will be expressed in a far more formalised language than that of its discursive context. This will tend both to narrow and ossify what can be thought within that theory, and hence restrict within its own assumptions, norms and practices its potential for developing “possibilities for knowledge”.

Sayer pointed out two other ways to understand what we mean by ‘theory’. One way is to understand ‘theory’ “as conceptualization in which ‘to theorize’ means to prescribe a particular way of conceptualizing something”, and the other is to understand theory as being “interchangeable with ‘hypothesis’ or ‘explanation’” (Sayer 1992, 50. His emphasis). In one form or another both these understandings of ‘theory’ find a place in discussions of methodology within political science such as those of Burnham et al (2008, 3), and, implicitly at least, within the various essays in Marsh and Stoker (2002), such as Sanders’ (2002) essay on behaviouralism. Beginning with the idea of theory as conceptualisation, there are two important issues that it identifies that need to be noted. The first is that theorising involves prescription. The second is that there is no one fixed way of conceptualising “something”. Unfortunately, it is not clear from the Sayer’s discussion of “theory as conceptualisation” why theorising prescribes, nor is it clear what it means to “conceptualise something”. If one responds that “to conceptualise” is to engage in theorising then the response is bordering on circularity.
While I will have more to say about the prescriptive issue later in the paper, here we might accept for the moment that the prescription identified by Sayers is a consequence of the internal organisation of the theory, its key concepts and the logical relations between them. Taking ‘governance’ here as our example then we might say that in this way a theory of governance then prescribes a particular way of conceptualising ‘governance’. But the crucial question then becomes: is prescription best understood in this way? On the other way of understanding ‘theory’ it is a bit of a stretch to treat ‘theory’ as interchangeable with either ‘hypothesis’ or ‘explanation’. While it might be that a theory hypothesises a particular claim as to why something is as it is, the hypothesis is not the theory. Rather, the hypothesis forms a proper part of a theory’s attempt to explain a given phenomenon or issue or problem. A theory may well constitute an explanation but in this case, we are back to the idea of understanding ‘theory’ as an “ordering-framework”, a framework constructed in specific ways and involving key words or terms that are recognised as concepts.

**Concepts and Theory**

At first glance it is convenient, even traditional, to regard a theory as being constructed on the basis of its various concepts. That is, particular concepts are combined in specific ways and the result is a theory that then enables its users to gain some understanding of whatever phenomenon is taken as its focus. In this respect concepts might be regarded as the building blocks of a theory. As noted above, some concepts, key concepts like ‘governance’, will be basic to the theory in that they effectively distinguish the theory from others using the same or similar terms, but in a different conceptual configuration. However, there are a couple of points to be made about this way of understanding the role of concepts within a theory. First, it treats ‘theory’ as merely a rationally ordered “arrangement of concepts” that enable any given phenomenon to be explained. Second, it conflates ‘concept’ and its particular linguistic marker (ie the word used to express it). Once that conflation is made it becomes difficult to engage in conceptual analysis because the focus becomes one of untangling the meaning(s) of the term rather than analysing the concept in the context of its contribution to constructing “an ordering-framework”.

A further, intimately related, problem with this conflation of word and concept is that it perpetrates the word and object relationship in which a given term or word supposedly has an essential meaning that is somehow or other unique to it. Specifically, a word designates a particular entity or thing that is said to exist because there is a word that “picks it out” and “signifies [ies] a thing’s essence” (Aristotle, *Topics*, 102a cited in Lakoff & Johnson 1999, 379). The word or term is therefore ontologically committed to a unique entity. For many theorists this Aristotelian way of relating word and object has exercised considerable influence over philosophical understanding of the “notion of a concept” (Lakoff & Johnson 1999, 379). While it is reasonable to suggest that particular entities are distinguished from other entities in specific ways, the manner of distinction is not given by the word. Of course Aristotle and others might respond that it is the definition of the word, and not the word itself, that “signifies [ies] a thing’s essence”, and hence it is the definition that marks out a concept’s ontology, not the word itself. But it is precisely because the definition is not given by the word, or the entity being designated by it, that a conflation of ‘word’ or ‘term’ with that of ‘concept’ must be avoided.
An alternative approach might be to take a step back and start with the premise that a word is not a concept. As Curtis (2002, 507) has suggested, following Foucault (1991, 19), concepts may be words, indeed they require words to express them, but it is concepts that “make a difference in theoretical discourse”. This is because it is the concept (not the word or term) in concert with other concepts that structures the intelligibility of a particular theory (and by extension the discourse in which the theory is itself is embedded). When analysing a concept, or indeed when engaging in conceptualising, the task is not to read off some meaning or other from the word, but to render intelligible the particular reality that a concept helps bring into being. That is, insofar as theories (and discourses) constitute “a system of possibilities for knowledge” (Flax 1990, 205), their key concepts become “central to the creation of new orders of knowledge” (Curtis 2002, 507). In fact Curtis takes the point a little further when he notes that concepts that emerge in specifically political and social contexts also contribute to “new objects of intervention, new forms of subjectivity and … new state forms” (Curtis 2002, 507). In the context of a discussion of ‘governance’ this is a salient point because a concept like ‘governance’ will already be aligned to particular claims or assumptions about the contested meanings of what might be termed “referred concepts” like ‘governing’, ‘power’, ‘political rule’ and the legitimate or acceptable limits to their exercise.

Implicit in Curtis’s view is the recognition that concepts are not neutral means to enable a given understanding of the world to be offered. Rather, concepts are as much partial and normative as they are descriptive. They are partial because they emerge or are framed within an already existing context which will provide the dominant derivation of the perceptions and understandings of the uses to which they (ie concepts) might be put from that particular context. The normative dimension can be seen from Tanesini’s (1994) work on analysing the concept ‘gender’. She challenged the idea that talk or claims about the meaning of a term amounts to a description of how the term is used (Tanesini 1994, 206). She has suggested that meaning-claims need to be understood “in terms of their inferential-justificatory role, that is, in terms of their justificatory conditions and of their inferential relations to other linguistic and non-linguistic expressions” (Tanesini 1994, 207). Thus when a meaning-claim is made about a particular concept, embedded within that claim is not simply a description of its actual use but a further claim as to how the concept should be used (Tanesini 1994, 207). In this way particular understandings, especially about what is taken to be real (or not) are built into the use of the concept in question.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, she suggests that meaning-claims attached to a particular concept carry with them pointers to other concepts which thereby draw the latter into the orbit of the former, which in turn effects a degree of mutual transformation of the concepts, often in unpredictable ways. For Tanesini it is this normative, and I would add transformative, dimension to meaning-claims that suggests that they (ie meaning-claims) “do not perform any explanatory role” in the sense of identifying the content of a concept, but rather they serve to prescribe “emendations or preservations of current practices” (Tanesini 1994, 207). The content ascribed to a concept is thus not a result of representation, but a result of the way in which meaning-claims are a “constitutive part of the concepts themselves” (Tanesini 1994, 210).
Conclusion
Applying the ideas about meaning-claims to ‘governance’, it can be seen that attempts to discern its meaning from its uses remains on the surface of the problem. It does not really enable the conceptual presuppositions to be exposed. This is part of the reason why scholars of governance do not seem to make much headway with theorising or conceptualising ‘governance’. Their claims about governance rested on the assumption that the meanings attached to the concept are to be found in the uses of the term such that the uses are, in effect, the meanings. These claims about the uses of governance then allegedly explain how these use-based meanings enable us to understand the processes of governing.

Yet herein lies the problem as developed in the above analysis. Concepts are always embedded within the wider semantic fields of their particular host theories and discourses. Thus ‘governance’ will draw in its wake particular claims or assumptions about the contested meanings of related or referred concepts. But just as significantly it will also presuppose particular institutional arrangements and practices as appropriate to each of these referred concepts such that an already formed, though rarely obvious, political ontology becomes the unspoken ground for the deployment of ‘governance’. As a given concept draws other concepts into its particular orbit of influence it brings about a mutual transformation that continually redraws the reality originally associated with the key concept. Moreover, relocating a concept from one discourse to another, especially a conceptually significant term like ‘governance’, will thus involve bringing along hidden conceptual baggage capable of distorting or undermining the new discursive space into which it is inserted.

Within the current governance scholarship the problem of theorising or conceptualising ‘governance’ remains to be addressed in a properly conceptual manner. Yet while it is one thing to demonstrate that governance scholars simply beg the question about conceptualising governance, it is quite another to develop an analysis that provides the conceptual precision that is needed. This paper has attempted to do justice to some of the issues involved while at the same time taking a few tentative steps in that direction. And so I shall conclude with an observation from the great underlabourer himself, John Locke, though his philosophical position on words and ideas is poles apart from my own. He noted that the learned scholars of his time failed to acknowledge “that the language of the sect that they are of has any faults in it which ought to be examined or corrected”, and hence their words become “but the covers of ignorance and hindrance” to understanding (Locke 1965, xxxv). What’s changed?
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