The Points of Concepts:
Their Types, Tensions, and Connections

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In the literature seeking to explain concepts in terms of their point, talk of 'the point' of concepts remains under-theorised. I propose a typology of points which distinguishes practical, evaluative, animating, and inferential points. This allows us to resolve tensions such as that between the ambition of explanations in terms of the points of concepts to be informative and the claim that mastering concepts requires grasping their point; and it allows us to exploit connections between types of points to understand why they come apart, and whether they do so for problematic ideological reasons or for benignly functional reasons.

I N recent years, conceptual analyses in terms of a common core of necessary and sufficient conditions have lost currency in favour of an approach that seems better suited to handling internally diverse concepts exhibiting a family-resemblance structure: the approach of *point-based explanation*.[1] Point-based explanations seek to make sense of concepts, and more particularly to understand why they have the intension and extension they do, by inquiring into the *point* of operating a concept with just these boundaries. From ethics to epistemology, philosophers have proposed point-based explanations of *blame*, *forgiveness*, *truthfulness*, *understanding*, *knowledge*, and *testimony* which all explore the idea that even when one's subject matter exhibits an internal diversity which eludes sharp definition, it might turn out

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[1] This is the umbrella term I shall use to designate a family of methods that go by a variety of names, such as 'paradigm-based explanation,' 'practical explica-tion,' 'genealogy,' 'reverse-engineering,' 'conceptual synthesis,' and 'function-first epistemology,' but which all take the point of something as their explanatory basis.

to be held together by its overarching point.[2] And in the growing literature on conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics, the point of a concept is also sometimes appealed to as something that should inform our attempts to improve the concepts we operate with.[3]

But despite its increasing prominence, talk of 'the point' of concepts remains remarkably noncommittal and ambiguous. This ambiguity is a problem. It is a problem not just for the obvious (though no less compelling) reason that point-based explanations will only be as clear and solid as the notion of a point they are based on. It is a problem also for the more interesting reason that failure to disambiguate between different types of points blinds us both to potential *tensions* and to illuminating *connections* between them. The potential tensions come into view once one recalls that there are several currents of thought in philosophy which insist that one needs to grasp the point of a concept in order to master it; this appears to conflict with the ambition of point-based explanation to teach us something new by revealing the point of a concept. As for the illuminating connections, they come into view once one has disambiguated a concept's different types of points and asks, not just *which* point should form the basis of point-based explanation, but also *what the point of having these different points* is. The ambiguity that seemed an obstacle then becomes itself material

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[2] See, e.g., Anderson (1999); Craig (1990, 1993, 2007); Dogramaci (2012); Fricker (2016, Forthcoming); Gardiner (2015); Greco and Henderson (2015); Hannon (2015, 2019); Henderson (2009, 2011); Henderson and Horgan (2015); Kelp (2011); Kusch (2009); Kusch and McKenna (2018a, 2018b); MacFarlane (2014); Mikkel (2015); Price (1988, 2003); Reynolds (2017); Williams (2002); Williams (2013).

[3] See in particular Brigandt (2010); Brigandt and Rosario (Forthcoming); Dutilh Novaes (2018); Haslanger (1999, 2000, 2012); Richard (Forthcoming); Thomasson (Forthcoming). See also Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett (Forthcoming); Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b); Cappelen and Plunkett (Forthcoming); McPherson and Plunkett (Forthcoming); Plunkett (2015, 2016). For a critical discussion of appeals to the points of concepts in conceptual engineering, see Cappelen (2018, ch. 16), and Thomasson (Forthcoming) for a response.

for point-based explanation, allowing us to see functional connections between the different types of points which shed light on *why* they come apart, and whether they do so for problematic ideological reasons or for benignly functional reasons.

Hence, in this paper, I propose to disambiguate talk of 'the point' of concepts and to develop a typology of points—not just in order to put point-based explanation on a clear and solid foundation, but also in order to resolve tensions with claims to the effect that mastery of concepts is point-based and to show how point-based explanation can harness the functional connections between different types of points.

I begin by showing, in §1, that talk of 'the point' of concepts really is ambiguous and in need of disambiguation. The clearest way of showing this is to confront point-based explanations with the thesis, which one finds in the work of Michael Dummett and in a different form also in the literature on thick concepts, that mastery of at least some concepts is itself point-based—a thesis I shall refer to as *MPB*. When juxtaposed with point-based explanations, *MPB* clearly generates a tension and a need for disambiguation, for how can revealing the point of a concept we use be informative if one already needs to have grasped that point in order to master the concept? In §2, I distinguish four types of points which concepts can be said to have: the *practical point*, the *evaluative point*, the *animating point*, and the *inferential point*. In §3, I then identify which type is at stake in point-based explanation and for which type *MPB* holds; based on these clarifications, I resolve the tension between *MPB* and point-based explanation by showing that point-based explanation brings out something we need not already know about a concept in order to master it, and I argue that disambiguating between types of points allows us to identify in more precise terms what the proper remit of *MPB* is, acknowledging its plausibility in two limited senses without overgeneralising it into an

intellectualist account of concept use. Finally, in §4, I show how point-based explanation can exploit the functional connections between the different types of points to make sense of why we take the point of a concept to be something other than the practical point it actually serves. Understanding why a concept has an animating or inferential point that diverges from its practical point can indicate that the points diverge for ideological reasons, in order to obfuscate the concept's practical point; or that they diverge for benignly functional reasons, in order better to serve that practical point.

1. Point-Based Mastery of Concepts

The ambition of point-based explanations to be informative seems to be in tension with the thesis, which has been defended in a variety of forms in twentieth-century philosophy,[4] that *mastery* of at least certain concepts is itself already *point-based*. This thesis can be articulated more precisely as follows:

> (*MPB*) For some concepts, it is a necessary condition on *mastering* the concept (i.e. on being able to apply it correctly) that one *grasp the point* of that concept.

Aspects of *MPB* that call for scrutiny include the notion of mastery or ability to apply concepts correctly, the standard of correctness involved therein, and the extent to which this mastery comes in degrees. In this paper, however, I shall treat these as given and focus entirely on the notion of the *point of a concept*. Distinguishing between different senses we can give to this widely used but far from transparent phrase will shed light on different versions of *MPB* and their relation to point-based explanation.

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[4] See Dancy (1995); Dummett (1959; 1973, 296–98); McDowell (1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

The historical roots of *MPB* reach at least as far back as Wittgenstein, in whose later work the point of language games is a recurring concern.[5] We later find the thesis lucidly articulated (in what we shall see is a variety of different versions) by Michael Dummett. Echoing Wittgenstein (2009, §§564–68), Dummett lends intuitive plausibility to *MPB* by drawing an analogy between concept use and the game of chess. He suggests that in order to be a competent chess player, it is not enough to know the rules by which the pieces move; one cannot be a competent chess player without understanding that the *point* of the game is to checkmate the king. Analogously, Dummett suggests, merely describing the usage of a concept is not enough to master it; one has to grasp the *point* of the concept.[6]

MPB has also been prominent among advocates of the idea that the extensions of thick concepts—concepts which are both world-guided and action-guiding due to their combining descriptive and evaluative aspects—would be *shapeless* were it not for some grasp of the concepts' points: without grasping a thick concept's point, one would be at a loss to decide, on the basis of past applications of the concept, whether some new item should be seen as one more instance of that concept or not.[7] As Bernard Williams puts the key idea, which he traces via John McDowell, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch to Wittgenstein (Williams 2011, 263n7): 'to understand how such a concept can be applied to a new sort of situation it is likely that one will have to grasp its evaluative point' (Williams 1995b, 206).[8] Jonathan Dancy elaborates: 'A person

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[5] See Ertz (2008) for a sustained discussion of the notion of the point or *Witz* in Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

[6] See, e.g., Dummett (1959; 1973, 295–98). For purposes of exposition, I pass over the subtleties and complications introduced by each of these passages. I give a more nuanced account of the different ideas Dummett conveys in these passages below.

[7] See Dancy (1995); Kail (2007, 73–74); Kirchin (2010); Roberts (2011, 2013).

[8] A further example is Elizabeth Anderson's claim that the 'factual components of thick concepts are selected to track their underlying evaluative point' (2004, 14).

from another culture who failed to see the evaluative point of a thick concept would not be able to predict local use of it on the basis of descriptive similarities alone' (Dancy 1995, 263).

It is clear already from this brief discussion that there is a need for disambiguation here, for how can exhibiting the point of a concept tell competent concept-users anything new if they already need to have grasped that point in order to *be* competent concept-users? In some respects, this problem of how a point-based explanation can be informative given that one already needs to have grasped the point to begin with is akin to the paradox of analysis, the problem of how a successful definition or conceptual analysis can be informative given that the *definiens/analysans* must be identical with the *definiendum/analysandum*.[9] One might speak here of the 'paradox of point-based explanation,' were it not for the fact that the problem all too obviously calls for resolution through disambiguation (and thus fails to present us, as a paradox worthy of the name would, with intuitively plausible premises that jointly entail an unacceptable conclusion). However, it is precisely because it so obviously calls for disambiguation that this tension is useful in motivating the present project. Clearly, what Williams and Dancy mean by 'the point of the concept' is not the same as what Dummett means by it,[10] and we therefore need a typology of points.

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[9] On the paradox of analysis, see Bealer (1982); Beaney (2014); Cobb (2001); Dutilh Novaes and Reck (2017); Earl (2007); Fumerton (1983).

[10] To anticipate, I shall argue that what Williams and Dancy mean is that one has to grasp the 'evaluative point' of a concept, whereas Dummett means that one has to grasp the 'animating point' of the concept.

2. Four Types of Points: Practical, Evaluative, Animating, and Inferential

According to the typology I want to propose in this paper, talk of the 'point of concepts' is ambiguous between at least the following four senses: the practical, the evaluative, the animating, and the inferential point. Let us consider each in turn.

(1) *The Practical Point of a Concept*: the salient practical consequence of using a concept at all, i.e. the *salient useful difference* which the concept actually makes to the lives of concept-users. Jane Heal nicely articulates the most general motivation for focusing on the practical point of concepts:

> . . . our concepts are bound up with our interests, that is to say things which matter to us because their presence in human life contributes to that life going well. What motivates the assumption is the fact that we are finite in our cognitive resources while the world is immensely rich in kinds of feature and hence in the possibilities it offers for conceptualization. Given our finitude, the fact that use of a certain concept enables the making of true judgements employing that concept does not, by itself, make intelligible our possession of it. Intelligibility requires further that thinking in terms of the concept is a worthwhile use of resources for us, in that it enables or enriches realization of one or more of our interests. (Heal 2013, 342)

But what should we treat as a 'realization of one or more of our interests'? The characterisation of a concept's practical point as the salient useful difference it actually makes to the lives of concept-users will be too broad if anything useful about a concept qualifies as its point. But we can understand it more narrowly by (a) cashing out *usefulness* in terms of the extent to which using the concept serves the *needs* and *interests* of concept users; and (b) cashing out *saliency* in terms that tie the relevant needs and interests to the particular explanatory purposes of the theorists in any given case. To say that a

useful difference is *salient*, on this view, is not to say that it is salient to the concept-users themselves—a concept's practical point need not be part of what motivates its use or guides its application; it is not necessarily something which participants are aware of at all. Rather, to say that a useful difference is salient is to say that among the many causal effects that use of a concept in a conceptual community actually produces, one or several are worth singling out *in light of the purposes we theorists bring to the concept*. Together, (a) and (b) narrow down the notion of a practical point, and do so in a manner that is in fact quite familiar. If one walks into a house, the totality of causal effects is unsurveyably vast; if one asks which effects serve the needs and interests of the house's human inhabitants, one can narrow the field to effects that have a practical point for them—keeping out humidity, letting in the light, bringing in electricity, and so on; and if one has walked into the house to repair the heating system, one has further guidance as to what kind of practical point one is looking for.

As with any broadly functionalist description, describing something in terms of its practical point highlights a select few in a vast network of causal effects, and the merits of the selection depend on our purposes in so describing them.[11] If we as theorists seek an explanation of why something like the concept of knowledge spread and endured in just about every human society, as E. J. Craig (1990) does, the fact that using that concept helps satisfy such a highly generic and basic human need as the need to gain information about one's immediate environment will be a salient useful difference made by the concept. If, by contrast, we are trying to understand the concept with a view to offering a feminist critique of it, as Haslanger (1999) does, other useful differences made by the concept will become salient.

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[11] See Barnes (1995, 43).

This last example also indicates that the proposed understanding of 'practical point' should not necessarily be taken to be individualistic, as it would be if a concept's usefulness were restricted to the respects in which it proved useful *to the individual* who used it. On the contrary, a concept's usefulness may reside in its tendency to serve *social* needs, i.e. needs possessed by the community over and above the needs of the individuals it encompasses (Queloz Forthcoming-d); or a concept's usefulness may reside in its tendency to serve the needs of a powerful group at the expense of the individual concept user, a theme I come back to in §4.

Thus understood, the notion of a practical point can be found to be at work in many different areas of the literature. It can be found in the 'paradigm-based explanation' of Miranda Fricker, for example, who is clearly talking about the practical point when she writes that the 'point of blame' is 'to increase the alignment of the blamer and the wrongdoer's moral understandings' (2016, 165); or in the 'genealogy' of Bernard Williams, who is concerned with the practical point of the concepts and dispositions involved in cultivating and valuing truthfulness when he concludes that truthfulness 'gets its point ultimately from the human interest, individual and collective, in gaining and sharing true information' (2002, 126);[12] or in the 'teleosemantic explanations' of Ruth Millikan, according to whom linguistic forms survive and are stabilised because their effects are of interest to hearers and/or

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[12] I explore the differences between Fricker's and Williams's approach in Queloz (Forthcoming-a). Both Williams and Fricker are also concerned with other types of points: on Williams's (2002, ch. 5) account, the animating point of truthfulness plays a crucial role in facilitating its subservience to its practical point, and Fricker (2016, 167) notes that what animates Communicative Blame is the desire to inspire remorse in the wrongdoer, which is distinct from the practical point of doing so. Thanks to a reviewer for pressing me on this.

speakers (2005, 54–63; 2017);[13] or in the 'Cambridge Pragmatism' advocated notably by Simon Blackburn (1993, 1998, 2013a, b, 2017a, b) and Huw Price (2011, 2017; 2013), who seek to naturalise such things as morality and modality by replacing questions about the *nature* of morality or modality with questions about the function or point of thinking and speaking in moral and modal terms. All these projects are concerned with the actual useful effects of particular conceptual practices on concept-users' lives, effects which may be of a very different sort from those that the practices aim at (if they aim at any), and which may or may not be transparent to participants in the practices.[14]

(2) *The Evaluative Point of a Concept*: the needs, interests, and values that together form an evaluative viewpoint which *informs* and is *betrayed in* the application of the concept. A viewpoint is *betrayed in* the application of a concept when no such concept application could have been produced by a concept-user that did not share or at least imaginatively inhabit that viewpoint.[15] What drives the insistence on the part of McDowell, Williams, Dancy, or Scanlon that one needs to

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[13] See Thomasson (Forthcoming) for an attempt to adapt Millikan's approach to the project of conceptual engineering.

[14] While my focus here lies on the fact that all these projects share a concern with the practical points of concepts, this broad classification papers over substantial differences in what exactly they take such practical points to be. See Queloz (Forthcoming-d) for further discussion of some of these differences.

[15] A. W. Moore (1997, 84–89) helpfully distinguishes between a representation *betraying* a point of view and its being *from* a point of view. While the latter concerns the nature of a given representation and its role in our thought, the former concerns *what informs the production of* that representation under particular circumstances—and here, as Moore himself says (89), evaluation is often crucial: 'a representation that distinguishes between various tonemes betrays the point of view of a Cantonese speaker (or a speaker of some other tone language), a point of view defined, in part, by the interests and concerns that make it worthwhile to classify phonemes in that way' (84). In Moore's usage, the fact that a representation *betrays* a point of view crucially does not entail that it is a representation *from* a point of view.

'grasp the evaluative point'[16] of thick concepts in order to apply them correctly is the conviction that, in virtue of the way in which thick concepts combine the evaluative and the descriptive, evaluation *feeds into* the determination of the extension of such concepts, which is why one needs to occupy, at least in imagination, a certain evaluative stance in order to apply them correctly. Scanlon unpacks the idea thus: 'In order to trace the contours of the ethical concept's applicability we have to understand its evaluative point . . . we must be guided by the evaluative perspective of a thick concept in order to apply it' (2003, 276). Williams glosses the 'evaluative point of the concept' as 'the outlook of those who use it' (1995b, 206). Elsewhere, he elaborates on this as follows:

> It has been increasingly accepted in recent discussions that the application of such concepts is guided by their evaluative point, and that one cannot understand them without grasping that point. (This does not mean that anyone who understands such a concept must have adopted it as his or her own, but it does mean that he or she needs to have imaginatively identified, as an ethnographer does, with those who use it.) (Williams 1996, 29)

The key idea in these debates is that the application of a thick concept is informed or guided by *evaluation on the part of the user* of the concept. Talk of the 'evaluative point' of a concept is slightly misleading in this respect, because what it refers to is not so much the point *of* that concept as the set of needs, interests, and values forming the evaluative viewpoint that *informs* and is *betrayed in* the application of the concept.[17] To grasp the 'evaluative point' of a concept is thus to grasp what sort of evaluation on the part of its user goes into its correct application.

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[16] See Dancy (1995, 263); Scanlon (2003, 276); Williams (1995a, 563; 1995b, 206; 1996, 29; 2011, 157). The same phrase is used by Anderson (2004, 14); Hart (1986, 12); Kirchin (2013, 12).

[17] See Thomas (2006, 146) for a nuanced discussion which supports this reading.

(3) *The Animating Point of a Concept*: the *aim*, *goal*, or *ideal* concept-users consciously pursue in applying the concept, and in terms of which concept-users make sense of the practice of using the concept. The animating point of chess, which Dummett refers to, is to achieve a checkmate position (or, more allegorically, to kill the king).[18] Mastering games generally involves having a clear sense of what the game's animating point is—of what, in playing the game, one is trying to do, where this is and needs to be distinct from the aim of winning the game.[19] This suggests that for a concept to possess an animating point, it is a condition on counting as a competent participant in the practice that one have a fairly clear sense of what the animating point of the conceptual practice is. This requirement admits of degrees, of course, but so does competence in participating in a practice: the animating point of soccer or football, for example, is to score more goals than your opponent, and since every move in the game is animated by that aim and must contribute to its attainment in order to count as a competent move, someone who failed to grasp the animating point of the game will quickly betray that fact.[20] Evidently, not all concepts have a well-determined animating point in this sense. But as Ingo Brigandt has argued, for example, when a scientific concept such as the concept of a *gene* is introduced by scientists with fairly specific scientific aims in mind—what Brigandt calls their "epistemic goal" (2010)—these aims animate the conceptual practice, motivating use of the concept and guiding its application and perhaps even its change over time. While this is unlikely to generalise to all concepts (Brigandt and Rosario Forthcoming; Cappelen 2018, 185), there are *some* concepts

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[18] As we shall see, Dummett also deploys the notion of a point in other ways.

[19] See Suits (2005, 48) for why there has to be an animating point of chess analytically distinct from winning.

[20] See Ertz (2008, 62–71).

where the conscious aims, goals, or ideals of concept-users determine a task and thereby set a standard for the use of the concept to meet. This task may differ from the concept's practical point; it is a task which may not in fact be fulfilled, and which the concept may in principle even be unfit to fulfil; but it is still naturally called 'the point' of the concept—in my terminology, its *animating* point.

Regicide in chess aside, it is for example the animating point which is at issue when Elizabeth Anderson presents the point of (the concept of) equality as being 'to end oppression' and 'to create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others' (1999, 288–89). The animating point of concepts is also central in certain legal practices, where authoritative decisions need to be made even in hard cases. Here it is part of the practice that its continuation is secured in part by its being based on and guided by the animating point of the concept.[21] Another example—which is more contentious, but which helps focus the notion of an animating point—is that of concepts involved in religious practices: consider the initially religious person who comes to believe that religious concepts serve a variety of *immanent* social and psychological functions, and who thereupon ceases to think in religious terms altogether; one explanation might be that this person thinks that the animating point of these concepts involves something *more* than the fulfilment of such immanent functions—that their animating point is to achieve correspondence *to* or *with* a transcendent realm, perhaps. Here the animating point, together with the realisation that what the concepts *actually* do in no way contributes to attaining it, helps explain why someone would give up certain concepts *despite* being convinced that they have social and psychological value in virtue of their practical point.

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[21] This is what Dworkin calls 'constructive interpretation.' See Dworkin (1986, 2006) and Brink (2016); de Graaf (2015) for further discussion.

(4) *The Inferential Point of a Concept*: the *salient inferential consequence* of applying a concept, that is, what properly and centrally *follows* from the fact that a concept's application conditions are satisfied. Grasping the point of a concept in this sense is what Wilfrid Sellars and Robert Brandom think sets a *bona fide* concept-user apart from someone who just reliably responds differentially to the satisfaction of a concept's application conditions.[22] It is constitutive of one's mastery of a concept that one is able to draw at least the most salient among the proper inferential consequences of applying it—to understand, for example, that if an exercise of public power was the result of a *democratic* decision, this means that it was to that extent *legitimate*. Of course, applications of concepts have many inferential consequences. But among these consequences are some that strike us as particularly significant given our concerns, because they tie in with these concerns. This inferential sense of the point of a concept also figures prominently in Dummett's writings, for instance when he considers a pupil who tries to master the concept of *validity* as applied to arguments while failing to grasp that an argument's being valid is a reason to accept its conclusion if one accepts its premises:

> [I]f he is taught in a very unimaginative way, he may see the classification of arguments into valid and invalid ones as resembling the classification of poems into sonnets and non-sonnets, and so fail to grasp that the fact that an argument is valid provides any grounds for accepting the conclusion if one accepts the premises. We should naturally say that he had missed the *point* of the distinction. (Dummett 1973, 454)

As Dummett's example suggests, the relevant notion of an inferential point does not simply correspond to the notion of an 'inferential role' as used in inferential role semantics.[23] It is, rather, the notion of a partic-

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[22] See Sellars (1997) and Brandom (2000, 63–66; 2015, 101–2).

[23] See, e.g., Brigandt (2010, 22); Harman (1987).

ular inferential consequence *worth singling out for its explanatory value*, a value it possesses because it ties in with the concerns of concept-users in a way in which other inferential consequences do not. In Dummett's example, the pupil's problem is not simply that he has failed to master a sufficient number of the inferential moves characteristic of the concept of validity; he has failed to grasp the one move that makes the concept worth bothering with in the first place—the one inferential consequence that enables the concept to guide one's reasoning and to improve one's thinking. Without this inferential connection in particular, the remaining inferential intricacies of the concept of validity are no more than idle play or scholastic classification for its own sake, because they fail to link up with our needs and concerns as reasoners. Just as talk of a concept's 'point' has its uses when we can profitable single out one among the various causal consequences of using a concept, so it has its uses when we can profitably single out one among the various inferential consequences of applying a concept. But as with causal consequences, *which* inferential consequence is worth singling out in any given case will depend on the particular explanatory interests and assumptions we bring to the concept—the inferential consequences worth picking out in an evolutionary psychologist's investigation of how a concept contributes to biological fitness, say, will differ from those worth picking out in a Marxist's investigation of how conceptual mystification serves capitalist interests.

Distinguishing these four senses of 'the point of a concept' thus brings out that the phrase is multiply ambiguous: it can refer to the practical consequences of using the concept, the evaluative point of view betrayed in applying the concept, the aims, goals, or ideals

guiding and motivating the application of the concept, or the inferential consequences of applying the concept.[24]

3. Sharing Without Grasping:
A Non-Intellectualist Account of Mastery

With these distinctions in place, we can now consider which type of point is at stake in point-based explanations, and for which type of point, if any, *MPB* holds. I shall argue in this section that the point at stake in point-based explanation is (1), the practical point of concepts, and that *MPB* is either false or misleading where (1) and (2), even though it does hold, with qualifications, for (3) and (4). This will licence the conclusion that the version of *MPB* that is relevant for point-based explanation does not stand in tension with the ambition of point-based explanation to be informative. And it allows us to identify in more precise terms what the proper remit of *MPB* is, acknowledging its plausibility in two limited senses without overgeneralising it into an intellectualist account of concept use.

Which type of point is at stake in point-based explanations? A thorough answer to this question would require an extensive review and exegesis of the relevant literature. Though I have engaged in some of that exegesis elsewhere,[25] I have no room for it here. I shall therefore confine myself to proposing an interpretive hypothesis and to drawing out its implications (the rest of this paper can be seen as an exploration

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[24] I use the contrast between concept *application* and concept *use* to mark the difference between (i) the question whether a concept applies *on a given instance* and (ii) the question whether we think or should think in these terms *at all*. When Oscar Wilde, upon being asked by the judge whether he denied that his novel was blasphemous, replied that 'blasphemy' was not one of his words (Montgomery Hyde 1973), the exchange turned on this distinction between concept application and concept use.

[25] See Queloz (2017, 2018a, 2018b, Forthcoming-a, Forthcoming-b, Forthcoming-c, Forthcoming-d).

of what would follow if this interpretive hypothesis were to prove correct). The interpretive hypothesis, which I take to be uncontentious enough, is this: the point at stake in point-based explanations is (1), the practical point. When E. J. Craig (1990) asks what the point of the concept of knowledge is, or Bernard Williams (2002) what the point of valuing the truth is, or Miranda Fricker (2016) what the point of the practice of blame is, they are all primarily interested in identifying the useful practical differences which such concepts, values, or practices make to the lives of creatures like us, where usefulness is cashed out in terms of the actual tendency to satisfy the needs and interests of concept-users.

Assuming that point-based explanations are based on (1), the follow-up question is whether *MPB* holds true for (1). I contend that it does not: we are perfectly capable of mastering concepts without grasping their practical point. One can be in a position to deploy a concept correctly in virtue of *sharing* the needs, interests, and values that *give* the concept its practical point *without grasping* what that point is. Sharing the needs, interests, and values that give the concept its practical point secures the necessary guidance in the application of a concept to new situations by rendering certain features *salient*. Needs, interests, and values can shape what is salient to us the way our eyes shape our field of vision.[26] The terminally thirsty person need not grasp the practical point of the concept of water in order to recognise water. Thirst will take care of rendering the more thirst-quenching features of the world salient. The same is true of thicker concepts: one need not grasp the practical point of the concept *truthfulness* in order to apply it correctly. The person who shares the needs, values, and interests that render it pointful to live by this concept will normally just *see*

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[26] See also Queloz and Cueni (Manuscript).

the relevant features of the situation that determine the applicability of the concept.[27] It is *concern* with the features picked out by the concept, rather than some reflective insight into the practical value of thinking in these terms, that separates the competent concept-user from someone to whom the finite set of past applications of the concept leaves its future use underdetermined.

Consequently, when a concept answers to our needs, interests, and values, our use of it will be guided by these concerns, and a conscious grasp of how these concerns bestow a point on the concept will not be required to master the concept. On this account, it would be an intellectualist overstatement to maintain that the practical point of a concept needs to be accessible to competent concept-users—that a description of that point needs to be among the contents of their thought. It is only at a more reflective level, if we want to understand our concepts better, that we have an incentive explicitly to represent to ourselves the practical point of our concepts and the concerns from which that point derives. Consequently, and crucially for the purposes of point-based explanation, to tie the unreflective mastery of a concept to the grasp of its *practical* point would be to over-intellectualise concept use.

When explicated in terms of (2), the evaluative point, *MPB* is not so much false as misleading: 'grasping the concept's point' then turns out to mean inhabiting or imaginatively occupying the evaluative point of view from which the concept's extension can be made out, something that is required whenever a concept's extension is a function of one's evaluative stance. Here also the decisive factor is whether one *shares*, or *can imagine sharing*, certain needs, interests, and values. Talk of 'grasping the concept's point' then suggests something more cognitive and

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[27] As elaborated by McDowell (1998c, 68–69); Wiggins (1976).

reflective than what is actually at stake. A less misleading formulation is the one Williams uses in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* when he writes that 'it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest' (2011, 263n7).

Although *MPB* is either false or misleading when spelled out in terms of (1) and (2), it can rightly be said to hold for other types of points. Cashed out in terms of (3), the animating point, it seems perfectly reasonable: if it is a condition on counting as a competent participant in a conceptual practice that one have a fairly clear sense of the animating point of the conceptual practice, then someone who wanted to master the relevant concept would necessarily have to grasp its point in that sense. When application of a concept is guided and motivated by an aim in this way, someone who failed to grasp what that aim was would be as far from genuinely using the concept as someone who moved the pieces on a chess board without grasping the aim of the game would be from genuinely playing chess. But even in this sense, *MPB* only holds for a limited range of concepts, because not all concepts involve such an animating point in the first place.

Finally, *MPB* has some plausibility also when cashed out in terms of (4), the inferential point. Here, mastering a concept is explicated in terms of understanding what follows from the concept's applicability, i.e. what inferences it licenses and what one commits oneself to by applying it. But not all inferences licensed by a concept are on a par. Many of the inferences licensed by the applicability of the concept *silver* are inferences that no-one but a few experts are able to draw, and yet it would be awkward to say that most people had failed to master the concept *silver* (at least in the undemanding sense of mastery used in this paper, which equates it with the competence to apply the concept correctly in everyday circumstances). To the extent that some of these inferences are plausibly seen as crucial or central to the

concept—so that someone who failed to draw them could be said not to have mastered the concept—it is true that mastering the concept requires grasping its inferential point. But in this sense, mastery is not an all-or-nothing matter. It comes in degrees. And which among a concept's inferential consequences strike one as particularly significant will again depend on one's concerns and reasons for using the concept. Together, these two considerations suggest that the inferential-point version of *MPB* is true but context-sensitive (mastery among laypeople may not count as mastery among experts), and that *MPB* should be amended to articulate not a necessary condition, but rather the thought that mastery and inferential capacities progress in lockstep.

In sum, the version of *MPB* that is relevant for point-based explanation does not threaten its ambition to be informative, and while *MPB* does hold with qualifications for (3) and (4), it is false or misleading when spelled out in terms of (1) and (2). In these latter two senses, mastery of concepts is a matter of sharing the concerns that give a concept its point rather than a matter of consciously grasping that point in any strict sense. Hence, if we advocate *MPB* without restricting the meaning and scope of this thesis accordingly, we interpret *MPB* too broadly and over-intellectualise concept use. But thanks to the typology proposed above, we can trace out MPB's proper remit.

4. Functional Connections and the Point of Divergent Points

I have been arguing that once we differentiate between four types of points, we can see that where there is a point one must have in mind in order to count as mastering a concept, that point is typically not the practical point. But this is itself somewhat puzzling. What is the *point* of taking something other than the actual practical point of a concept to be the point of that concept? In other words, why do we

not always use our concepts with an eye on whether they are serving their practical point?

In this last section, I want to draw a more positive picture of the relations between the four types of points and point-based explanation which suggests an answer to that question. I shall argue that point-based explanation allows us to see the *functional connections* between different types of points, and that it can exploit these functional connections to explain *why* these points align or come apart in particular cases.

The explanatory power of point-based explanation derives from the fact that it initiates an aspect-shift in how we view our concepts and invites us to take a view of them we do not usually take: it invites us to take an *instrumental* view of our concepts and to regard them as tools or techniques that are more or less suited to our ends. This instrumental perspective also brings into view certain *criteria of aptness* by which to assess our concepts *as tools* according to whether they are, in the practical sense, pointful or pointless for us. For it to make sense to speak of a concept as having a practical point for a concept-user, certain conditions need to be fulfilled. To begin with, there must be certain needs, interests, or values to determine a *task* in relation to which the concept can be understood. Then, using the concept must have *effects* that *tend to be conducive to the fulfilment* of that task. And finally, the concept itself must be such as to be an *apt tool* for the production of these effects.

From this instrumental perspective on our concepts, the different types of points distinguished above all naturally fall into place. The practical point (1) is the pointfulness or instrumentality of the concept in fulfilling a certain task and serving certain needs, interests, and values. The evaluative point (2) is the set of needs, interests, and values that give the concept its practical point by determining a task for

it to fulfil. The animating point (3) is the concept-users' conscious representation of such a task, while the inferential point (4) is a key element of the concept's inferential articulation which contributes to its being an apt tool for fulfilling that task.

From the instrumental perspective of point-based explanation, we can then inquire into the functional connections between these different points and, by showing how they contribute to the concept's aptness as a tool, use these connections to explain why the concept combines these various points in the way it does: the practical point of a concept *given* its evaluative point can be used to explain *why* its animating point and its inferential point are as they are, and in particular why they *diverge* from the practical point—in the typology outlined above, (1) given (2) can explain (3) and (4).

At bottom, such an explanation works by revealing what the practical point is of taking something other than the practical point of a concept to be the animating or inferential point of that concept. The explanation shows that the concept's having the animating or inferential point it does serves a practical point, and that this animating or inferential point either lines up with the practical point or differs from it *the better to serve* that practical point. In some cases, the practical point of a concept may be best served if its animating point aligns with its practical point, so that the practical point is overtly understood to be the 'name of the game'—this is the case if, assuming the practical point of the concept is to ϕ, we aim, in applying the concept, to ϕ. Similarly, the practical point of a concept may be best served if its inferential point aligns with its practical point, so that it follows from the concept's applicability to x that x is a means of ϕ-ing.

But point-based explanation comes into its own where the animating or inferential point *diverges* from the practical point. We can

distinguish three kinds of divergence: *contingent* divergence, *deceptive* divergence, and *benign functional* divergence.

First, *contingent* divergence is what we have when a concept's animating or inferential point fails to line up with its practical point, but for what, from the instrumental perspective of point-based explanation, must appear as purely contingent reasons. For example, a concept originally picking out a food item *as* healthy (i.e. licensing the inference from x being such a food item to x being healthy) might be harnessed by a religious movement and come to have as its salient inferential consequence not that x is *healthy*, but that x is *holy*.[28] In this case, assuming the practical point of the concept is to render concept-users suitably sensitive to the presence of a healthy food item, the inferential point would come to diverge from the practical point; but the divergence would be an accident of history, something to be explained in terms of causes rather than reasons. In cases of contingent divergence, point-based explanation is of interest because it directs our attention towards the practical dimension of concepts (e.g. their effects on health), which helps explain why we have them especially in cases where that dimension may be veiled by other concerns (e.g. concern with the holy). The category of contingent divergence allows for the fact that while our concepts may serve practical purposes in many respects, and those practical purposes may help explain why we have them, the fact that human beings live under culture means that there is also ample room for our concepts to acquire non-functional features reflecting the influence of cultural contingencies. Cultural variation between groups and cultures implies that even if certain functional features were the same across these variations, our concepts would nevertheless also be shaped by different contingencies in

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[28] Another example might be the use of concepts of purity by fascist movements as described by Jason Stanley (2018).

each case. Hume displays sensitivity to precisely this point when he writes that houses, though they share certain functional features and conspicuously 'point all to a like end' (*EPM*, 3.2), also vary from one culture to another in their non-functional aspects (or aspects that are functional only relative to more local concerns). Similarly, what our concepts instrumentally *need to be* is only a very partial guide to the form they actually take.

Second, *deceptive* divergence is what we get if a concept serves a practical point which, if it became transparent to concept-users, would lead many of them to give up the concept, because that practical point is in *tension* with the concept's animating or inferential point. It is in this structure that we can situate the cases familiar from Critical Theory and ideology critique, where diagnoses of ideological functions can get a grip by showing that the practical point actually served by a concept radically differs from the aims that animate its use and the inferences we draw with it. In such diagnoses, the concepts in terms of which advocates of human rights, liberalism, or egalitarianism think and argue, for instance, are made out really to serve the practical point of promoting Western domination, imperialism, or inequality.[29] These diagnoses identify a radical divergence between, on the one hand, the *aims* animating the use of such concepts and the *salient inferences* drawn from their application, and, on the other hand, the *practical effects* of thinking in these terms. The divergence is a deceptive one because the diverging points are in tension with one another: the use of the concepts is revealed to be counterproductive by the evaluative standards these concepts themselves encode. A point-based explanation identifying such a deceptive divergence can nevertheless be explanatory by revealing the practical point, for people with an

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[29] See, e.g., Anghie (2007, 292); Bell (2016); Koskenniemi (2005); Mills (1998); Moyn (2010); Pagden (1995); Pitts (2005).

interest in promoting Western domination, imperialism, or inequality, of deceiving other people—and perhaps even themselves—into taking the point of these concepts to be a loftier one than the practical point they actually serve. The animating and inferential points then serve the divergent practical point by *concealing* it. Here the functional connection between the different points is such that it cannot be entirely transparent to the concept-users if they are to use the concepts in a fully engaged, non-cynical manner.[30]

Third, the divergence may also be of a *benign functional* kind. This is the case when some outcome is not best achieved by having concept-users aim for that outcome, but rather by having them be animated by something other than the desire to achieve that outcome. When the practical point of a concept is to achieve some common good—such as the pooling of information, for example—the tragedy of the commons entails that the common good is under threat as long concept-users are animated by and conceive of the common good solely in terms of its instrumental value to them. The best way of reaping the benefits of the common good may then be for concept-users to be, in Williams's phrase, bloody-minded rather than benefit-minded, for instance by having people think of the disposition to truthfully pass on information to others as something that is not just instrumentally valuable insofar as it contributes to the pooling of information (a consideration that may have little weight for me when I can deceive for gain), but as something that is valuable in itself.[31] On this picture, the practical

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[30] There are further important questions in this area which I leave aside here, but which an effective use of point-based explanation for the purposes of ideology critique would have to raise, such as: How does the practical point of the concept fare, not just by the lights of its animating point, but *all things considered*? *Whose* needs and purposes does the concept serve, and are these needs and purposes *we* want to see satisfied? Thanks to a reviewer for raising these issues.

[31] See Williams (2002, 59).

point of thinking in terms of the concept of truthfulness is that it is conducive to the effective pooling of information; but the animating point of the concept that is on our minds as we discriminate and choose between truthful and untruthful behaviour is not this social benefit, but a concern with the goodness or rightness of truthfulness. Similarly, the salient inferential consequence we draw from something's being an instance of truthfulness is not that it will have contributed to maintaining a system of epistemic division of labour, but rather *that it is a good thing* just because that is the kind of action it is. This divergence of points is *functional* because it renders the system of epistemic division of labour less vulnerable to the dynamics of the tragedy of the commons. But it is a *benign* functional divergence because the functional connection between the different points is such that it *can* become entirely transparent to concept-users without undermining the confidence with which they use the concept. On the contrary, the functional connection can be made explicit in the hope of *strengthening* their confidence in the concept.[32] A point-based explanation will then reveal *why* the points of the concepts *need* to diverge in the way they do, and why it makes good functional sense for them to do so, because the most effective way to ϕ by means of the concept of x is to take the animating and inferential points of the concept to be something other than ϕ-ing.

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[32] As exemplified by Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*, which is an instrumental vindication of intrinsic valuing that turns on understanding why there is a benign functional divergence of points in the concepts Williams discusses under the broad heading of truthfulness; see Queloz (2018b).

Conclusion

I have been arguing that we need a typology of points if we are to put point-based explanation on a clear and solid foundation and to navigate potential tensions and fruitful connections between different types of points. On the basis of the typology I have offered in this paper, I have shown how exactly point-based explanation can avoid presupposing a grasp of what it is supposed to reveal; I have argued that this typology allows us to put in its place the otherwise overly intellectualist thesis that mastering a concept requires one to grasp its point, and that its proper remit turns out to be fairly limited; and I have argued that point-based explanation can exploit the functional connections between the points of concepts to make sense of why we sometimes take the point of our concepts to be something other than the practical point they actually serve: a concept's having a certain animating or inferential point that differs from its practical point may serve to conceal its practical point, or it may itself serve that practical point. It thus turns out that there is a point both to there being, and to distinguishing between, different types of points.[33]

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