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Content and Competence

Rechtstheorie · Legal Theory

Mohr Siebeck
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## Content Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Figures</td>
<td>XIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Methodological Remarks &amp; Clarifications</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Approaching Rights</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Overview of Content</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The General Functionality of Normative Systems</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Normative Systems I: The Concept of a Normative System</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Freedom of Decision and Actions</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Deontic Logic</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Principles, Norms and Values</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Normative Systems II: The Multiplicity of Normative Systems</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The Theory of Rights</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Hohfeld’s Scheme of Fundamental Legal Entitlements</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Choice Theory versus Interest Theory</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Conclusion and Prospects</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Summary: Line of Thought and Central Results</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A Few Concluding Remarks</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. Methodological Remarks & Clarifications .......................... 1

1. Approaching Rights ................................................. 3
   a) Conceptual versus Justificatory .................................. 3
      aa) Definitions: Some Introductory Remarks .................... 5
   b) Descriptive Jurisprudence versus Normative Jurisprudence ...... 13
      aa) Different Types of Reasons ..................................... 14
         bb) The Methodology-Debate: A Discussion at Cross-Purposes .... 15

2. Overview of Content .................................................. 17

II. The General Functionality of Normative Systems ............. 21

1. Normative Systems I: The Concept of a Normative System ...... 21
   a) Addresser and Addressees ....................................... 22
   b) Consistency ..................................................... 24
      aa) Specificity of Actions ....................................... 26
         bb) Normative Relevance of Circumstances .................... 27
            cc) Persistence of Normative Judgements .................. 30
   c) Theoretical Relevance of the Concept .......................... 31

2. Freedom of Decision and Actions .................................... 31
   a) Necessary Presupposition: Undetermined Decisions ............... 32
   b) The Concept of Actions .......................................... 35
      aa) The Standard Conception ..................................... 35
         bb) The Causal Structure of Action Explanations ............... 36
            cc) Breadth and Generality of Action Descriptions ......... 42
               (1) Breadth ............................................ 43
               (2) Generality .......................................... 44
   c) Frankfurt’s Critique of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities..... 45
### Contents

**3. Deontic Logic** .................................................. 48
   a) Fundamentals of Standard Deontic Logic .................................. 50
   b) Revision of SDL .................................................................... 56
      aa) Two Perspectives on Actions – Two Levels of Deontic Logic ...... 57
          (1) Actions and Omissions ................................................. 59
          (2) Two Kinds of Deontological Statements .......................... 63
      bb) Two Meanings of Permission ........................................... 69
   cc) Analogy between Alethic and Deontic Modal Logic? .................. 70
      (1) Constructing an Analogy: Two Levels of Statements .......... 70
      (2) Deconstructing the Analogy: Understanding and Assessment
          of ‘Alternatives’ ............................................................ 73
          (a) Alternatives I: Understanding ....................................... 73
          (b) Alternatives II: Assessment .......................................... 74
      (3) Distinct Epistemological Interests ..................................... 75
      (4) Excursus: Dilemmas as the Missing Theoretical Piece in SDL .. 77
   dd) Imperative Logic as an Objection? ........................................ 78

**c) Implications of the New Scheme** ........................................ 80

**d) Conclusion** ..................................................................... 83

**4. Principles, Norms and Values** ........................................... 84
   a) Introduction: Principle Theory .............................................. 86
      aa) Principle Theory: Central Theses ....................................... 87
      bb) Central Points of Criticism .............................................. 90
      cc) Terminological Issues ..................................................... 91
   b) Principles, Norms and Prescriptions ....................................... 92
      aa) Prescriptions as Distinct from Norms and Principles ............. 92
          (1) Normativity as a Process ............................................. 92
          (2) Structural Features of Principles, Norms and Prescriptions .. 94
      bb) From Principle to Prescription ........................................... 97
      cc) The Impracticability of Principles ...................................... 98
      dd) Conclusion ..................................................................... 101
   c) The Problem of ‘Hard Cases’ ................................................. 101
      aa) Principles as Normative Properties? The Relation of Axiology
          and Normativity .............................................................. 101
      bb) Rule Account vs. Principle Account .................................... 104
      cc) Fallacies of the Rule Account ............................................ 106
      dd) Conclusion ..................................................................... 108
   d) Conclusion ..................................................................... 109

**5. Normative Systems II: The Multiplicity of Normative Systems** .... 110
   a) Introduction: Multiple Normative Systems in Practice ............. 111
   b) Vertical Extension of Normative Systems: Justification and Plurality .. 112
      aa) Justification: The Infinite Regress of Justification ................. 113
bb) Plurality I: The Fact of Competing Judgements in Subordinate Systems ............................................ 116
cc) Plurality II: The Possibility of Joint Validity or Four Kinds of Normative ‘Consistency’................................. 117
c) Excursus I: Supererogatory Actions ........................................ 122
d) Excursus II: The Relation of Law and Morals ............................ 123

III. The Theory of Rights .......................................................... 131

1. Hohfeld’s Scheme of Fundamental Legal Entitlements .................. 132
   a) Hohfeld and the Logic of Normative Systems ....................... 133
      aa) An Introduction to Hohfeldian Terminology ...................... 133
   bb) Central Axioms and Theses ............................................ 135
       (1) Correlativity-Axiom ................................................. 135
       (2) Advantageousness-Axiom ......................................... 138
       (3) Exclusivity and Discriminability .................................. 138
       (4) Parallelism of First-Order and Second-Order Entitlements .... 139
       (5) Restriction to Practical Reasons .................................. 139
   cc) Fundamental Legal Positions and Normative Systems ............ 139
      (1) Claim-Rights and Duties .......................................... 139
      (2) Liberties and No-Rights ........................................... 141
         (a) Unilateral and Bilateral Liberties ............................... 142
         (b) Liberties and Protective Claim-Rights: Introduction ........ 143
      (3) Powers and Liabilities ............................................. 145
      (4) Immunities and Disabilities ....................................... 147
   b) Critical Appraisal of Hohfeld’s Scheme ............................... 147
      aa) Advantageousness and Appendance .................................. 147
      bb) Revaluation of the Entitlements .................................. 151
         (1) Claim-Rights ....................................................... 151
         (2) Liberties .......................................................... 154
            (a) Determinateness of Liberties as Active Entitlements ...... 155
            (b) Liberties as Bilateral Permissions ............................ 158
            (c) The Relation of Liberties and Claim-Rights ................. 158
            (d) Duties as a Disadvantage? .................................... 161
            (e) No-Rights: A Sudden Change in Perspective ............... 166
            (f) Conclusion ...................................................... 167
      (3) Powers ................................................................. 167
         (a) Powers as Protected Permissions ................................ 168
         (b) Powers in the Vertical Extension of Normative Systems .... 172
         (c) Liabilities and the Structural Divergence of No-Rights .... 174
      (4) Immunities ........................................................... 175
      (5) ‘Rights in the Strictest Sense’ ..................................... 176
   c) Conclusion ................................................................. 179
2. **Choice Theory versus Interest Theory** ........................................ 180
   a) Choice or Will Theory – Introduction .................................. 181
   b) Interest or Benefit Theory – Introduction .......................... 184
   c) Choice Theory – Theoretical Clarifications ....................... 189
   d) Interest Theory – Theoretical Clarifications ..................... 195
   e) Methodological Classification and Evaluation of Interest
   and Choice Theory .................................................................. 200
      aa) As Purely Descriptive Theories ................................... 200
      bb) As Substantive, Justificatory Theories ......................... 201
      cc) As Conceptual Theories ............................................. 207
         (1) Linguistic or Practical Adequacy ............................ 208
         (2) Normative Inclusivity or Normative Neutrality .......... 208
         (3) Meta-theoretical Accuracy ..................................... 210
            (a) Lack of Feasibility through Indeterminateness ........ 212
            (b) The Structural Problem of Interest Theory with Regard
                to Paternalism .................................................. 213
            (c) The Emergence of Rights or Right-Based versus
                Pure Duty Ethics .............................................. 215
            (d) Conclusion .................................................... 221
      dd) Conceptual Evaluation or the Making of a Decision ......... 221

IV. Conclusion and Prospects .................................................... 225

1. **Summary: Line of Thought and Central Results** .................. 225
2. **A Few Concluding Remarks** ............................................. 229

Glossary ................................................................................. 233
Bibliography ........................................................................... 237
Index ...................................................................................... 253
# Table of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Causality Model I</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Causality Model II – Agent Causation</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Square of Oppositions with Alethic Modalities</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Square of Oppositions with Deontic Modalities</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Two Levels of Alethic Modal Logic</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Second Level of Alethic Modal Logic – Alternative</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Comparison – Alethic and Deontic Modalities</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>DS with Revised Deontic Operators</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Functionality of a Normative System as an Inductive-deductive Process</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Structural Features of Normative Elements</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Hohfeldian Correlatives and Opposites</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. Methodological Remarks & Clarifications

What is a right? As simple as it may seem at first glance, that is the underlying and overarching question of this thesis. Undoubtedly, we are all familiar from everyday life with the notion of rights. We suppose that we, as human beings, generally have rights, we use them as arguments in normative discourse, we claim them, we argue (sometimes fiercely) about who or what has or ought to have which rights. In short, the language of rights is “pervasive […] in politics, law and morality”\(^1\). Accordingly, knowing that there are rights as an essential part of our normative practice, at first glance, at least from the point of view of someone inexperienced in legal and moral philosophy, it should not be too hard to clarify what rights actually \textit{are} then. Yet, it is this seemingly straightforward issue upon which philosophers and jurists have failed to reach even a basic agreement literally for ages. Why is that so? Taking a closer look, it is not just the nature of rights, but the nature of the initial question itself that appears problematic. Essentially, we must ask ourselves: does it suffice to confine oneself to the question ‘what is a right?’ in that form? Are we looking into the nature, the essence of rights then? How can we determine the nature of a normative term like ‘rights’ anyway? In short, is the epistemological interest specified enough by the initial question to possibly get a clear and meaningful result? Unsurprisingly, to ask this last question is to negate it. The reason for negating it lies not only in the vast amount of literature on the topic itself, sometimes seeming like an impenetrable and dense jungle to any new arrival, but also the fact that in this jungle all sorts of ideas on rights from all sorts of perspectives, scientific disciplines and cultural backgrounds have been lumped in with one another and grown together to make it appear to the interested reader as impermeable as well as opaque.\(^2\) Thus, starting any treatise on rights – arguably, with this topic even more so than in general – it seems absolutely vital to point out very clearly the exact epistemological interest, the aim and method of an endeavour like the one ventured here. To the sophisticated reader with a philosophical background, some of the following remarks might thereby seem self-evident and as such superfluous; yet, hopefully, it can and will be demonstrated that it is flaws and


I. Methodological Remarks & Clarifications

inaccuracies in the involvement with these fundamental questions that make quite a lot of current and traditional literature on rights defective. In this respect, to point out the importance of methodological clarity at the beginning of any treatise on rights seems more than just appropriate but actually a vital necessity.

To begin with, the ultimate aim of this thesis will be to formulate a suggestion for a concept of rights which captures the essence of the term and, most importantly, can serve as a common basis for substantive normative debate and theory design due to being normatively neutral. We shall look into the meaning of ‘normative neutrality’ presently. Beforehand, it is important to note that a central aim of this thesis is to thoroughly explore and describe the path which leads to the determination of such a concept. In other words, the goal is not only or primarily to produce an independent concept of rights, but also and especially, to clear the way a bit for future discussions about rights. Hence, this book is supposed to be just as much a work about rights as it is one about the theory of rights. Or, once more figuratively speaking: the main aim is to cut a small swathe through the jungle of rights theory and rights talk. By doing so, this book will at best not only shed a little light on a few of the darker spots in there, but also, by letting some fresh air into some of the denser parts of the forest, let out some heat from a few longstanding debates in the context of rights. Specifically, our interest will be on the debate about the proper concept of rights, focusing on the two major theory families: Interest (or Benefit) Theory and Choice (or Will) Theory.

One more remark before proceeding: The cutting of a swathe straight through a wide range of areas of moral and legal philosophy has the advantage of connecting knowledge that is too often left unconnected, thus enabling us to gain a better theoretical overview. Naturally, it is accompanied by great disadvantages as well, which can only be named and have to be accepted as such. Because the goal is theoretical clarification, synthesis, and exegesis, a number of highly problematic theoretical issues will have to be dealt with throughout this work, and a few self-developed ideas will have to be sketched, most of which cannot be explained to a full or (even vaguely) satisfying extent in a thesis like this. In most parts, highly controversial theoretical issues will be dealt with rather cursorily or even only be touched on en passant. Naturally, this might give rise to accusations of superficiality, which are equally naturally hard to rebut. Thus, to a certain degree, I will have to rely on the indulgence of the reader, and especially of all those scholars whose works, though related to the overall topic of rights, I could not incorporate into this thesis. A famous quote ascribed to Ger-

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3 In this respect, I share a general aim, if not necessarily the quality of his work, with the great legal theorist Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart, who in the preface to his seminal book ‘The Concept of Law’ noted that one of his goals was to ‘discourage the belief that a book on legal theory is primarily a book from which one learns what other books contain. So long as this belief is held by those who write, little progress will be made in the subject; and so long as it
trude Stein is: “I like a thing simple but it must be simple through complication. Everything must come into your scheme, otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity.” This somehow dialectical relation between simplicity and complication appears inevitable for our purposes as well. And albeit the aim of this thesis is to simplify the idea of rights, a mere sense of reality forces us not even to try to explain every problem associated with rights. Even though I am fully aware that this might in parts result in a lack of comprehensiveness, we shall nevertheless try to lunge out as far as possible in terms of investigating theoretical problems/disputes linked with the notion of rights and consequently connect the dots. Such a kind of endeavour, despite its obvious weaknesses, is believed to be able to play a valuable part in this – as in any – debate in legal theory.

1. Approaching Rights

Thus, what exactly is our epistemological interest with regard to ‘rights’? And how can we distinguish it from other possible approaches? G. E. Moore put it in a nutshell when he wrote that generally “in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements […] are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer.” If as much is true, we should clarify at first what exactly the question is that we are trying to answer.

a) Conceptual versus Justificatory

Thus, let us dwell on the possible concrete aims of a theory concerning rights. In discussing rights, it is widely acknowledged – and often too uncritically adopted, for that matter – that one can and should distinguish between two kinds of approaches: an analytical, conceptual, or meta-ethical one in search for an answer to the question ‘what are rights?’; and a justificatory, normative one aiming at a satisfactory answer to the question ‘what rights should there be?’, i.e. how a normative system containing rights should be substantively shaped.
As indicated above, ours is supposed to be a conceptual inquiry\(^7\), i.e. in general we are looking for some kind of definition or explanation of the term ‘right’. More precisely, we are planning to find and acquire an adequate understanding of the term ‘right’ – as in statements like ‘A has a right to do X’, ‘A has a right towards B that B not do Y’ or similar ones – which ought to make the term compatible with or viable for any conceivable and coherent substantive normative theory. The general goal of a conceptual inquiry thus understood is as basal as it is vital for any theoretical discourse. It is nothing but terminological clarity, i.e. a clear and commonly agreeable understanding of a central term used in a certain field of interest. The idea is to find and define the term in question in a way so that everyone participating in a substantial discourse can a priori agree on its basic meaning. Yet, is this the same kind of endeavour that other scholars undertook, who examined the concept, the meaning or the nature of the term ‘rights’? Quite clearly not, as there are various ways to approach ‘rights’ as a social phenomenon. To begin with, one could approach the term from an empirical, descriptive\(^8\) perspective, analysing only the actual usage of the term. Furthermore, one could be interested in the historical dimension, the tradition and genesis of the term, examining the origins of usage and the way the term developed over time. Finally, one could choose a more philosophical approach and try to acquire the best possible understanding of the term ‘rights’ in a given social context, i.e. a certain linguistic practice of a certain group of speakers, with the main goal of producing a consistent definition. Are the respective products of these approaches all different kinds of ‘concepts’? Accordingly, what exactly is meant by ‘conceptual’ and what is meant by ‘justificatory’? However clearly the distinction between conceptual and justificatory approaches is sometimes stated, it is at least as common in theoretical discourse to assume a blurring of lines between the above-mentioned two levels. For instance, both Choice Theory and Interest Theory are regularly believed to function on both levels alike.\(^9\) Thus, it appears advisable to examine the exact relation between...

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\(^7\) The term ‘conceptual analysis’ is consciously avoided here, because our aim shall not be a mere analysis of the term ‘rights’, i.e. a decomposition of the factual usage of the term. This thought will be clarified presently. See also below sec. I, fn. 19.

\(^8\) Descriptive in the sense of ‘referring to facts’, not in the sense of ‘normatively neutral’, see presently sec. b), a).

these two levels – the conceptual and the justificatory – and the two respective epistemological questions as a first step.

*a) Definitions: Some Introductory Remarks*

Preliminarily, a few brief, and I suppose for philosophers of language unnervingly shallow remarks about definitions or specification of linguistic terms in general appear necessary. Some introductory thoughts, again based on classical remarks by *G. E. Moore*, shall lead the way. In his seminal work ‘Principia Ethica’ he described three different ways of defining a term: the arbitrary verbal definition, the verbal definition proper and a third one, which he gives no specific name. The arbitrary verbal definition is purely stipulative, not (necessarily) taking into account the actual usage of a term. An example is, ‘I define a table as a piece of furniture with a flat top and three legs’. Given the relativity of language, such a definition is possible, of course, but in effect it is more or less senseless. It can be regarded as common sense that language is alive, that it is generally developable, and thus improvable, but also that it is a mere social fact. A definition which entirely loses its reference to the actual usage of the term that is being defined is bound to fail. On the other hand, the aim of a strict verbal definition proper is to describe only the actual usage of a term, like in the sentence: “All English speaking persons understand a ‘table’ as being X.” A subset of this kind of definition is the dictionary definition; in our example the Oxford Dictionary defines a table as “a piece of furniture with a flat top and one or more legs, providing a level surface for eating, writing, or working at”11. As we can already see in comparison to the arbitrary definition above, this kind of approach bears the advantage that it is properly linked with language as a factual phenomenon. For example, we all know tables with just one leg, which no one under normal circumstances would deny the quality of being a table. However, from mere experience we know that the common usage of a term can often be irregular, by times inconsistent.12 So, taken for granted that a general aim (if not the general aim) of philosophical enquiries is to reduce and at best eliminate inconsistencies in language usage, this kind of definition is not conclusively helpful either, as it only refers to facts irrespective of the correctness or cogen-

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12 It appears almost trivial to state that, even with a relatively clear example like this one, there will always be marginal cases. How high does an object have to be to still be qualified as a table? How large does the surface have to be? One does not unduly have to stress his or her imagination to come up with examples in which people could and would most probably disagree about the table-quality of an object. However, these are problems of interpretation of a general definition, not so much of correctness of the definition as such.
I. Methodological Remarks & Clarifications

cy of a certain concept. In other words, if we simply analyse the factual usage of a term, we may work out certain common features, but we are unable to determine whether the usage was or is sensible in the first place. Finally, Moore continues by explaining a third way of defining a term. With this one “we may mean that a certain object, which we all of us know, is composed in a certain manner: (...)”13 Thus, if we understand this statement correctly, an ideal definition of a term would be equivalent to a conclusive list of all elements (including their interdependent relations) of a certain object – their ‘defining’ features. Yet, this kind of precision can in practice hardly ever be expected. There will always be objects which could fall under a term but need not necessarily do so. There will always be marginal cases.14 Once more, not all elements of a definition are a matter of controversy. In our example, there are elements in the definition of a table, which I presume, are undisputed amongst all members of a linguistic community. Such ‘core features’ of a table could for instance be ‘an object with a flat top and at least one leg for people to stand or sit at’. So, it is presumed that, when various speakers discuss the features of a table, they might disagree on some features, e.g. the height or the number of legs, whilst they would most probably all agree on the features object, flat top, leg(s) and standing or sitting opportunity.15 Thus, it appears sensible to divide the definition process into two separate steps: First, one can work out factual minimum requirements which the investigated term has to meet, i.e. such conditions which every reasonable speaker of a certain language would still agree upon, leaving aside those conditions that cause or could cause disagreement between different speakers within the same community. If these minimal conditions are found, we have found what we shall henceforth call the scope16 of a term. As an intensional definition17 the scope is as such not viable for practical usage. For a start, it is merely

13 Moore, Principia Ethica, 8.
15 As such it is not far from the dictionary definition, see above fn. 11. Even if they were equivalent in this case it would not ruin the more general point, though. In that case the dictionary definition would simply restate the core elements; that is, it would somewhat incidentally be just as wide as the scope of the term ‘table’.
16 What is called the scope of a term here should by no means be confused with the similar notion of a prototype, see e.g. Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence, “Concepts,” in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 1997–), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/concepts/, sec. 2.2. A regular dinner table with four legs would for example most probably be called a prototype of a table (as everyone would agree on the table quality of the object), which does not imply that all tables need to have four legs. The minimal definition is wider. It includes all possible understandings of a term.
equivalent to the widest possible understanding in a given linguistic context, i.e. within a certain group of speakers. Methodologically, we use pure analysis in order to gain the scope. Hence, the scope does not have to rely on any value judgements. It is purely descriptive. As a second, consecutive step we are now able to gain a proper concept by evaluating the scope with respect to such quality features that might make it a good – that is, valuable and viable – concept. Thereby we might find additional definitional features for the term in question. Yet, importantly, a concept in this sense does not necessarily have to be narrower than its scope with regard to cases of application. That is, the second evaluative step should not be confused with a critical evaluation of those definitional features which are or could become a matter of controversy or with a decision in these controversies either way. To do as much would mean stipulation. Yet, a concept as presented here merely can be stipulative – it does not have to be. In other words, although a concept can be just as wide as the scope and consist of only its necessary core features, there need to be good reasons (or at least a good reason) for such a wide concept. Thus, the difference between scope and concept lies not in critical or marginal cases, which, as one may assume, could be excluded by the former and somewhat included by the other, but rather in the way each of the two is won. The scope is won by means of a pure, descriptive analysis of actual language use. It represents the smallest common denominator of various, possibly divergent ways in which a certain term is actually used. Whether this scope makes a good concept is an entirely different matter. In order for something to be a good concept there have to be reasons for why we should apply this concept and not some other one. In case of the scope applied as a concept, it has to be at the very least the pragmatic reason that speakers do not have to adjust their usage of the term (or at least reduce necessary adjustments to a minimum). However, there might be different reasons why another, narrower concept could be preferable. What these reasons are in particular with respect to a concept of rights shall be investigated in much detail in sec. III, 2., e). For now, we shall just establish that the task of gaining a practically viable concept should be divided into two steps: a purely descriptive analysis with the result of gaining the scope of a term, and a subsequent (evaluative) decision for or against a concept, which can but does not have to be congruent with the scope depending on the significance of the reasons voting in favour of the respective concept. The advantages of such a two-step conceptual inquiry as

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18 With respect to quality features of a concept of rights this reason represents the feature ‘practical adequacy’, cf. below sec. II, 2., e), cc), (1).

19 Cf. above fn. 7. The common term ‘conceptual analysis’ is purposefully not used, because what is proposed is just not a plain analysis, but a methodological approach which is in search of the best possible term to be used as a basis for further (substantive) inquiries. Only to
just described are supposedly evident: It combines positive aspects of both of
the first two approaches concerning definitions described by Moore. It is evalu-
ative and thus (at least possibly) stipulative, i.e. it is aimed at a somewhat good
or better language, and it is not just a delineative inventory. However, due to the
prior descriptive, analytical step it is thus only to an extent where inconsist-
encies and irregularities in language use are ruled out, and the concept still meets
the fundamental understanding of a term in everyday usage, i.e. of all relevant
speakers involved. Hence, the concept is regenerated with language as a factual
phenomenon. Such a bipartite kind of conceptual inquiry takes into account not
only the contingency of language, but also its actual existence as an undeniable
social fact to cope with.

Importantly, the foregoing remarks do not imply that one should in any case
proceed the way proposed here when examining a certain term. It is simply
the way we shall proceed in this context. Undoubtedly, there are other possible
theoretical designs, other kinds of analyses.\textsuperscript{20} Ours is the project of finding a
concept which shall serve a specific purpose, namely to structure and linguis-
tically harmonise the debate about rights but without losing connection to lan-
guage as a factual phenomenon. As such it is presumably most closely linked
to Haslanger’s notion of an \textit{ameliorative analysis}, combining strictly analyti-
cal and evaluative elements.\textsuperscript{21} Thereby it is neither strictly descriptive, nor his-
torical, albeit it does not per se disregard historical aspects nor such aspects re-
garding the term’s factual usage.\textsuperscript{22} Also it should not be mistaken with the goal
of the ‘philosophical’ approach sketched earlier, in search for a consistent usage
of the term, for the best possible understanding in a given context. Such a ‘con-
cept’ would not have to rely on any kind of evaluative judgement, which repre-
sents a decisive difference in comparison to our approach. That is, if consist-
tency were the only criterion to mark the quality of a ‘concept’, we could reach
our goal simply by means of (pure) analysis.\textsuperscript{23} Apart from these rather crude ex-
planations, the cogency of the idea of a combination of purely descriptive and
evaluative elements in order to reach the goal proposed earlier will have to be
axiomatically presupposed for the ensuing work. Unfortunately, a further de-
velopment of this matter is not possible in this context.

\textsuperscript{20} See e.g. Sally Haslanger, “What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and
HaslangerWGOI.pdf, 6 ff. Page reference refers to the online version.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 7.
\textsuperscript{22} Cf. below sec. III, 2., e), cc).
\textsuperscript{23} We shall return to this thought much later, in sec. III, 2., e), dd), when actually making a
decision between the merits of Choice Theory and Interest Theory.
bb) The Scope of Rights

Let us transfer the foregoing ideas about the kind of ‘concept’ we are looking for to our problematic initial question, ‘what is a right?’ To begin with, we ought to determine the scope of the term ‘rights’. In order to do so we need to ask ourselves: What out of all things could possibly be called a right? Like in the example above, we cannot rely on mere prototypes or typical examples. A table with one leg can be a table just as well as one with six or eight legs. Accordingly, we have to examine all the relevant ways in which the term is used and consequently derive the core features by method of elimination. To start with, here are a series of statements containing the notion of ‘a right’, all of which I presume are most common and recognisable from everyday usage of the term.

(I) I have a right to bodily integrity.
(II) My friend Q has a right not to be insulted by you.
(III) Babies have a right not to be abused or harmed in any way.
(IV) A has a right to claim the money out of a sales contract with B.
(V) C has a right to attend demonstrations and express his opinion on the government.

As our aim is to find those features that every reasonable speaker would agree upon, we can now continue asking: Which possible features of rights can already, only from investigating these examples, be excluded from the scope? Given the statements above were all commonly accepted we can infer:

(1) Rights are not necessarily only active, i.e. regarding one’s own actions, see (IV) and (V), but possibly also passive, i.e. regarding the actions of others, see (II) and (III).

(2) The ability to have rights is not necessarily linked with the ability to make one’s own decisions, i.e. with moral or legal agency, see (III).

(3) Rights do not even necessarily have to be associated with a certain action, see (II) – (IV), but they can also be abstract, see (I).

What is then left to positively extrapolate from the five rights statements above are three core features, all of which I believe would be agreed upon by

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24 It is questionable whether there are any prototypes for ‘rights’ at all. Show people a regular dinner table and they will happily agree that they are standing in front of a table. Show them even the most basic statement containing information about a right or rights and they are probably going to argue about it.

25 Surely, it is possible that singular speakers could disagree at this point. It is impossible ever to exclude this possibility entirely. Our aim is therefore to name certain general and generally accepted cases of applications, which can be regarded as overall accepted and understandable.

26 Despite its obviously problematic implications, the idea of ‘reasonable’ speakers will have to be presupposed at this point in order to deduce the respective core features.
both Interest and Choice theorists as well as proponents of any other theory concerned the nature of rights. Essentially, rights are normative, they are generally advantageous\(^\text{27}\), and they are appendant, i.e. they are bound to specific entities.\(^\text{28}\) In detail:

(1) Rights are an essentially normative phenomenon. This first point is supposedly indisputable.\(^\text{29}\) The fact that rights are a (possibly integral) element of normativity\(^\text{30}\), which is to say that their nature cannot ever be fully captured

\(^{27}\) Arguably, one could also refer to this feature of rights as being ‘beneficial’. Yet, the notion of ‘beneficence’ appears to be too strongly pre-shaped by substantive theories; especially, it evokes associations with consequentialist theories, not least with the substantive tradition of interest/benefit theories of rights, see therefore below sec. III, 2., e), bb). Due to our goal of producing a normatively neutral concept, such associations shall be avoided by using the supposedly more neutral terms ‘advantage’, ‘advantageous’, ‘advantageousness’ henceforth. For a more detailed exposition of this point cf. below sec. III, fn. 183.

\(^{28}\) Undoubtedly, the choice of example-statements determines the result with regard to the features of the scope. Thus, the objection lies at hand that they were chosen just in order to produce this result. In other words, the (allegedly) purely descriptive nature of the scope might neverthless have a covert, evaluative stance to it due to the conscious selection of only a few, certain examples and not all actual manifestations of a term. On the contrary, I assume that it is impossible to actually find example-statements that could foil the result found here. The three features are constant and could only be refuted by means of pure stipulation, i.e. by claiming “There is a non-personal right to peace”, “For A to have rights is detrimental for her” or even “I ride my right to work”. These propositions would surely not be generally agreed upon.


\(^{30}\) The much debated notion of normativity arguably asks for some clarifications at this point: First, it is supposed there is a fundamental difference between the normative as referring to reasons (see therefore in more detail presently in sec. I, 1., b), aa) and the descriptive as referring to fact. Implied is the common idea of a strict separation of ‘is’ and ‘ought’, at least to the extent that one cannot derive any normative conclusions merely from a set of facts. For the origin of considering the is-ought-relation as a problem, which is related to, but ought to be clearly distinguished from Moore’s commonly known (and terminologically misleading) notion of a “naturalistic fallacy” (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 13), see David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, repr. 2009 [1738]), 302. Cf. also: Hans Kelsen, *Hauptprobleme der Staatsrechtslehre*, 2nd ed. (Reinheim: Scientia Aalen, 1960 [1923]), 6–10; id, *Reine Rechtslehre*, 2nd rev. and extended ed. (Wien: Verlag Österreich, 2000 [1960]), 196. Secondly, especially legal theory is often concerned with the notion of normativity, namely with what is often regarded as the ‘problem of normativity’ of the law in contrast to the normativity of morality. For introductions on this problem (with further references) see: Torben Spaaek, “Kelsen and Hart on the Normativity of Law,” in *Perspectives on Jurisprudence: Essays in Honour of Jes Bjarup*, ed. Peter Wahlgren (Stockholm: Stockholm Institute for Scandinavian Law, 2005), esp. 398–401; id, “Legal Positivism, Law’s Normativity, and the Normative Force of Legal Justification,” *Ratio Juris* 16 (December 2003): 478–481; Andrei Marmor and Alexander Sarch, “The Nature of Law,” in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 1997–), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/lawphil-nature/, sec. 1.2. Even though hardly sufficient to match the level of sophistication of the debate, a few arguments for why the normativity of law should not be regarded as a problem at all, i.e. why we should not deny the undoubtedly normative nature of legal rules (therewith denying structural differences between legal and moral rules), will be laid out below in sec. II, 5., d).
Index

Actions 9, 18, 24 ff., 31 ff., esp. 35–48, 92 ff.
  – ~ as events 35 ff.
  – ~ as such 32, 48, 57 f., 70
  – basic ~ 37, 42 ff.
  – action descriptions 27, 42, 45
  – group ~ 43
  – individuation of ~ 43 f.
  – specificity of ~ 26 f.
  – standard conception of ~ 35 f.
Advantageousness 10 f., 18, 83, 138 ff., 147 ff., 161 ff., 170 f.
  – individual ~ 148, 150, 164, 179, 184, 187, 189 ff., 214 f., 228 f.,
  – ultimate ~ 135, 148 f., 152, 157
Agency 9, 32 ff., 36
Agent causation 33, 38 f.
Alethic and deontic modal logic 53 ff., 70 ff.
Allowed competition 144, 160 f., 167, 198
Alternatives of conduct 73 ff.
Ameliorative analysis 8
Appendance 10 f., 18, 131, 136, 141, 147 ff., 179, 185 ff., 194, 196 ff., 220 f., 228
Authority 22 f., 31, 49, 57, 78 f., 95, 112 ff., 126, 128, 148, 181, 206, 211 ff., 217 ff.
  – personal and substantial ~ 22 f., 114, 211, 213, 218 f.
  – political ~ 22 f., 126
  – ~ within a domain 183
  – moral ~ (in a Kantian sense) 32 ff., 82, 157, 162 f.
Axiology 91, 101 ff., 106

Benefit Theory see Interest Theory
Bona-fide purchases 146, 168 f.

Categorical imperative 162, 231
Causal relations 33 ff., 38 ff., 43 ff.
  esp. 210–212, 221–223, 225, 229
  – protective ~ 142 ff., 154, 158 ff.
Coherence (as a form of normative consistency) 118, 120 f., 124
Commands of optimisation 88, 95
Communitarianism 204 f.
Compatibilism 32 ff., esp. 34, 46
Compatibility (as a form of normative reasoning) 118 ff., 206, 208
  – individual ~ 69, 80 ff., 113, 116, 131, 176, 189, 196, 210 ff., 220, 230
Concepts 2 f., esp. 4 f., 10 ff., 20, 179 f., 200 ff., 207 f., 221 f.
  – demystification of ~ 129, 207
  – linguistic or practical adequacy of ~ 207 f., 210, 222, 229
  – meta-theoretical accuracy of ~ 15, 207, 210, 212, 221, 229
  – normative inclusivity of ~ 204, 207 ff.
Conceptual approaches 3 ff., esp. 4, 7 f., 202
Conclusive judgements 25 f., 218
Concretisation 97, 108, 198, 227
Conflicts 24 f., 66, 88 f., 99, 116, 125 ff., 230
  – ~ of norms 25 f., 66, 88
Index

Conformity and non-conformity (see also Legitimacy) 58, 76, 142 ff., 234
Consequentialist ethics 10, 29, 67 ff., 108, 201, 203, 206
Content 22 ff., 30, 64, 69, 71, 80 ff., 92 ff., 104, 112 ff., 128, 140, 154, 174, 197, 210 ff., 218, 231
Contingency 54 ff., 70 ff., 77
Contradictories 54 ff., 77, 134
Contraries 54 ff., 77

Decisions
  – ability to make ~ 32 ff., 41, 62, 77, 80, 155, 197
  – practical or effective ~ 18, 25, 32 ff., 36, 39 ff., 47 ff., 57 ff., 64, 70, 75 ff., 97 ff., 109, 145, 172, 226 ff.
  – undetermined ~ 32 ff., 36, 39, 45 ff., 51
Definitions 5 ff., esp. 12
  – intensional ~ (see also Scope) 6 f., 131
  – verbal ~ 5
Definatory power 69, 83, 113, 131, 168 ff., 217, 230
Deontic logic 18, 48 ff., 83 ff., 122 f., 150, 217, 226
  – different levels of ~ 49, 57 ff., 64 ff., esp. 70–80
  – unidimensional and multidimensional ~ 58, 71, 75, 78 ff., 142, 234
Deontic modalities 48 ff., esp. 64 f., 70 ff., 93, 120, 139 ff., 226
Deontic square 54 ff., 73, 77
Deontological ethics 29, 68, 108 ff., 201
Dilemmata 25, 64 ff., 74, 77 ff., 102, 233
  – true or genuine ~ 25, 64 ff.
Disability 134, 136, 147, 175 f., 177, 235
Duties 18, 80 ff., 95 f., 119, 134, 139 ff., 147 ff., esp. 151 ff.
  – ~ as a disadvantage 161 ff.
  – ~ to oneself 158
  – ~ simpliciter 166, 187, 218
  – Hohfeldian ~ 134, 139 ff., 147 ff.
  – non-enforceable ~ 184, 191 f.
  – positive and negative ~ 48, 61, 66, 83, 140

Entitlements 132 ff., 189, 195 f., 201, 216, 221, 228 f., 235
  – active and passive ~ 151 f., 155 ff., 176 ff., 189, 196
  – correlativity of ~ 134
  – exclusivity of ~ 138 f., 178
  – first-order and second-order ~ 134 ff.
Events 32 f., 35 ff., esp. 38–40, 43 ff., 57, 145

Free will 32, 34, 45, 217
Freedom 32 ff., 89 ff., 115, 217
  – ~ of expression 89, 95 f., 100, 115
  – possibility of ~ 32 ff., esp. 32–35

Generality of norms 98 ff.
Hard cases 85, 90, 97, 100, 101 ff., 109
Hedonism 28, 111
Homogeneity (as a form of normative consistency) 22, 24, 118, 120 f.
Ideal ought 88, 99
Immunity 134, 138, 147, 175 ff.
Implicative logic 78 ff.
Implications between Hohfeldian entitlements 176 ff.
Impossibility 54, 56, 72 f.
Incompatibilism see Compatibilism
Infinite regress of justification 112 ff., 123, 176
Interest Theory 4, 18 f., 83 ff., 176, 179, 180 ff., esp. 184–189, 195–200, 207 ff., 212 ff., 229
Intersubjectivity 18, 23, 32 f., 40, 47 f., 57 f., 63, 76, 81 ff., 85, 113, 122, 125, 148, 162 f., 171 f., 186 ff., 228 f.
Intrinsic value 23, 81 f., 113 ff., 147, 155, 184, 194, 196, 219
Jurisprudence 13 ff., esp. 15–17
  – descriptive and normative ~ 15 ff.
Index

Justification of normative judgements 113 ff.
Justificatory approaches 3 ff., 12, 15, 17, 154, 200 ff.

Law
– concept of ~ 13, 17, 123 ff., 129
– ~ and morals 123 ff.
– ~ as interpretation 16, 17, 225

Legality 32 f.
Legitimacy and illegitimacy 63 ff.
Libertarianism 204 f.
Liability 134, 147, 174 ff. 177
Liberties 49, 133 f. 141 ff. 154 ff., 167, 169 ff., 177, 182, 189, 192, 210, 212 ff., 226, 228
– complete and incomplete ~ 160 f., 174
– unilateral and bilateral ~ 49, 142 ff., 153 ff., 158, 182, 226, 228

Monism 112, 121
Morality 32 f., 112, 127 ff.
Methodology debate in jurisprudence 13 ff., esp. 15–17

Necessity 52, 54, 56, 72 ff.
No-right 134, 139, 141, 144, 151 ff., 166 f., 174 f., 228
Normativity 10, 14, 22, 32 f., 90 ff., 101 ff., 106, 223, 228
– ~ as a process 92 ff., 104, 154
– axiology and ~ 101 ff., 106
Normative ~
– consistency 112, 118 ff.
– exemptions 49, 55, 70 f., 77, 80, 154, 157, 226, 234
– inclusivity see ~ neutrality
– relevance of circumstances 27 ff.
– status 49, 57 ff., 63 f., 71, 125, 143, 234

Normative Systems 3, 14, 18, 21 ff., esp. 21–31, 110 ff.
– addressers and addressees of ~ 22 ff.
– default ~ 173 ff., 178, 191
– intersubjective ~ 23, 122, 186 f., 215, 228
– intrasubjective ~ 23, 117, 125
– justification of ~ 113 ff.
– multiplicity of ~ 110 ff., 116, 121 ff., 228
– temporal extension of ~ 30, 43, 93
– validity of ~ 111 ff., esp. 117–121, 123 f., 127
Norms 25, 66, 71, 84 ff., 92–100, 104 ff., 149, 226
– structure of norms 92 ff., esp. 95–98

Obligation 26 ff., 48 f., 51 f., 55 f., 65 ff., 74 ff., 77 ff., 95, 98, 102, 116 ff., 122 f., 140 f., 151 f., 167 ff., 178, 206, 226, 234
Omissibility 55
Omissions 41, 49, 51 ff., 56, 59 ff., 145, 162
Options of conduct 25, 57 ff., 63 f., 70, 73 f., 142, 218
Ought-implies-can 102 f.

Paternalism 188 f., 191, 200, 209, 213 ff.
– weak and strong ~ see unilateral and bilateral liberties
– two meanings of ~ 63 ff., 69 f.
Persistence of normative judgements 23, 30 f., 113 ff.
Pluralism 112, 121
Positivism 11, 13, 126
– ~ as protected permissions 168 ff.
– ~ in the vertical extension of normative systems 172 ff.
Practical decisions 18, 25, 32 f., 39 ff., 44 ff., esp. 47–48, 57 ff., 70, 78 f., 97 f., 109, 226 f., 234
– as first causes 36, 39 ff., 44 ff.
Prescriptions 24 ff., 28 ff., 66, 84, 90, 92 ff., 99 ff., 105, 117 ff., 149, 226 ff.,
– structure of~ 95, 97 ff.
Prima-facie ~
– judgements 25 ff., 66, 68, 96
– reasons 87, 90
Primary reasons 36
Principle of alternate possibilities 45 ff., 73
Principle Theory 18, 84 ff., 92, 99 ff.
– applicability or impracticability of~ 85 ff., 87 ff., 94 ff., esp. 98–101, 104 ff.
– as normative properties 101 ff.
– structure of~ 94 ff.
Principle account and rule account 104 ff.
Prohibition 48 ff., 51, 56, 61, 64 ff., esp.
68, 78 ff., 95, 118 ff., 140 ff., 151, 226

Reasons
– conceptual ~ 15, 103, 180, 207 ff.
– conclusive ~ 28, 148 f., 154, 233
– definite and prima-facie ~ 87 ff.
– persistent ~ 23, 113 ff.
– practical ~ 25, 80, 84 ff., 95 ff., 101, 109 ff., 139, 148 ff., 179, 203 ff., 227
Relation of precedence 89, 95 ff., 100 ff., 107, 153
Relationing 97, 108, 227
Retroactive punishment 30
Rights 1 ff.
– active and passive ~ 9, 155 ff., 170, 176 ff., 189, 196, 216, 228
– animal ~ 136, 184, 194, 196 f., 200, 208
207–223, 229 ff.
– constitutional ~ 31, 89, 100, 109 f.
– delimitation of ~ 187 f., 196 ff.
– emergence of ~ 82, 215 ff., 220
– group ~ 136, 161
– non-enforceable ~ 184, 191 f.
– as an argumentative counterweight
160, 211, 216, 219 f.
– of the incompetent 136, 184 f., 194 f., 199, 208, 223
– unwaivable ~ 183 ff., 190 ff., 223
Right-based ethics 153 f., 215 ff.
Right-holders 11, 131, 134 ff., 157, 166, 187, 194, 196 f., 214, 227
Rules see Norms
– structure of ~ see structure of norms
– of precedence 88
Satisfiability 118 ff. 124
Self-addressed commands 23 f., 98
Small-scale sovereign 124 f.
Specificationism 110
Standard Deontic Logic 50 ff., 55 f., 69 f., 77
Subcontraries 54 f., 77
Supererogation 122 f.
Third-party beneficiaries 188, 198
Trolley-problem 65 ff.
Trying 37 f., 43
Value Theory 112
Values 15, 28, 67, 84 ff., 90 f., 94, 227
Varieties of goodness 14, 103 f.
Will Theory see Choice Theory