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CONCEPTS IN PHILOSOPHY—A ROUGH GEOGRAPHY

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Much recent work on concepts has been inspired by and is developed within the bounds of the representational theory of the mind often taken for granted by philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists, and psychologists alike (see e.g. Margolis and Laurence 1999; Stich and Warfield 1994). The contributions to this volume take a more encompassing perspective on the issue of concepts. Rather than modelling details of our representational architecture in line with the dominant paradigm, they explore three traditional issues concerning concepts. Inquiring into how language and the mind are interrelated, Brandom, Bermúdez, Nida-Rümelin and Racokzy ask:

- Is mastery of a language necessary for thought?

Pondering whether drawing on concepts to explain our thinking requires us to adopt the representational paradigm of the mind in the first place, Kenny, Glock, and Saporiti are concerned with the question:

- Do concepts reduce to abilities?

Finally, in order to assess the prospects for philosophical reliance on conceptual analysis, Jackson, Nitz, Spicer, and Textor discuss:

- Is the analysis of concepts a viable means to ascertain truths from the proverbial armchair?

Needless to say, there is no consensus to be had on either issue.

This introductory essay explores the backdrop to the debate our authors engage in. We will provide a rough geography of key ideas and issues shaping the overall debate on concepts within contemporary philosophy. We will proceed in two steps. In a first step, we will present and discuss key ideas

shaping the assumptions and expectations concerning concepts philosophers harbour (§1). Taken together, they form what we want to think of as the conventional picture of concepts. In a second step, we will focus on recent developments and divisive fundamental issues that have brought about tectonic changes in the philosophical views on concepts (§2). These explain why the conventional picture has gone basically out of fashion and why the philosophical debate on concepts in general appears heterogeneous, and feels fragmented.

1. *Concepts in philosophy: some traditional ideas*

In line with well-known instructive attempts to characterize the nature and role of concepts (see Fodor 1998, ch. 1, Margolis and Laurence 1999b, and especially Burge 1993), we present a list of popular ideas concerning concepts. Although items from our list are often presented as platitudes, we hold that it neither catalogues mere truisms, nor states a general consensus. The list rather registers key ideas as to what concepts are, and what concepts do, that figure prominently in the contemporary debate. Apparently, few contemporary philosophers subscribe to the conventional picture of concepts in its entirety. As we shall see in §2, many philosophers embrace fundamental views about thought, language, and content which lead them to re-interpret or reject core ideas of the conventional picture.

Talk of ‘concepts’ looms large in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language, and it plays an important role in epistemology. These disciplines, however, focus on different aspects when debating concepts. Philosophers of mind primarily invoke concepts to account for the distinct features of our thinking. Here it is widely held that

- (1) Concepts are sub-components of thoughts.

On this assumption (see e.g. Rey 1998), Alfie’s belief that cats are more dangerous than groundhogs and his belief that Joe’s only pet is a cat share a sub-component—*viz.*, the concept CAT. This puts Alfie in a position to infer that Joe’s only pet is more dangerous than a groundhog by mere logic, and it allows him to infer that groundhogs are not the most dangerous animals by analytical inference. (The latter requires the popular though contentious assumption that GROUNDHOG is a complex concept containing, as it were, the concept ANIMAL.) It also explains why Alfie’s ability to think

the thoughts mentioned puts him in a position to grasp systematically related thoughts such as the thought that groundhogs are more dangerous than cats. It finally explains why Alfie can entertain thoughts he has never thought before, and why acquiring a single new concept allows a thinker to entertain a whole new range of thoughts. In sum, the idea that there are concepts as characterized by (1) explains why thoughts typically come related, why thoughts appear to be structured, and why our thinking is systematic, creative, and expansive. It also provides a first characterization of what concept possession amounts to: a thinker possesses a concept *C* if and only if she can think thoughts containing *C*.

In addition to taking concepts to be sub-components of thoughts, philosophers of mind standardly embrace an idea about what concepts contribute to the thought they are sub-components of. They think that

(2) Concepts are representational and determine intensions.

Although there is substantial debate on how we are to understand (2) precisely, it seems safe to say that if Alfie possesses the concept CAT, he can think of objects in a specific way, *viz.* as cats rather than, say, as groundhogs. A concept hence constitutes a particular way of thinking of things. Any such way of thinking determines, for any possible world, an extension of items—objects, properties, relations, events—thought about. But since ways of thinking are finer individuated than the items thought about, one may think of the same items in different ways. Taking concepts to be representational thus allows one to account for the opacity of intentional states as well as the differences in intentional action resulting from intentional states involving the same extensions. This explains why thinking that cats are furry and thinking that the only animals Joe actually likes are furry amount to different things, even though the only animals Joe actually likes are cats. It also explains why Alfie gets up to bang on his neighbour's door on learning that Joe is mistreating his cat, but doesn't do so on learning that Joe is mistreating his only pet, even though Joe's only pet is a cat. The representational nature of concepts provides a second characterization of what concept-possession amounts to: a thinker possesses a concept *C* if and only if she can think of items in the particular way constitutive of *C*.

Being representational, concepts determine intensions. But to determine an intension is to mark off specific items—traditionally captured as those 'falling under' the concept—from those that do not. Taking concepts to be representational thus fits nicely with holding that

(3) Concepts guide categorization.

Taking concepts to guide categorization explains why it is so useful to possess them (see Carey 2009, Murphy 2002). It also allows us to see the point of enriching our conceptual repertoire. Suppose that although Alfie has had concepts such as CAT, BIRD and GROUNDHOG for some time, he only recently acquired the concept FUR. He can now distinguish in thought furry creatures such as cats and groundhogs from non-furry creatures such as birds. This allows him to attune his actions to specific features of his surroundings cutting across the categories he used to work with. For instance, he can now decide to shun all creatures with fur. This close connection between concepts and categorization provides a third characterization of what concept-possession amounts to: a thinker possesses a concept *C* if and only if she can distinguish in her thought between items falling under *C* and those that do not.

Once we turn to the philosophy of language, the focus changes from accounting for distinct features of thought to accounting for manifest properties of meaningful expressions. A common idea (see Hanfling 2000, ch. 4) within the theory of meaning is that

(4) Concepts are the meanings of (general) sub-sentential expressions.

There is no consensus as to which sub-sentential expressions express concepts. It is often held that general terms such as ‘cat’ or ‘stockbroker’ do, whereas singular terms such as ‘Zurich’ do not. Concentrating on the former, (4) assures us that we can sum up the semantic properties of the English expression ‘cat’ by noting that it expresses the same concept as the French expression ‘chat’, *viz.* the concept CAT. The fact that ‘cat’ expresses CAT explains why ‘cat’ applies to cats (they are the items falling under the concept CAT), why ‘cat’ is often understood to analytically entail ‘animal’ (CAT is often understood to contain, and hence to analytically entail, ANIMAL), and what ‘cat’ contributes to the meaning of sentences it occurs in (it contributes the concept CAT).

Theorists embracing (4) invoke concepts to explain what expressions mean. Concepts moreover figure prominently in accounts of understanding. It is habitually surmised that

(5) Concepts are pivotal to the understanding of language.

On (5), Alfie understands the term ‘creature’ just in case he knows that ‘creature’ expresses the concept CREATURE. This in turn requires Alfie to

master that concept. Understanding the general terms of a simple language thus requires mastering specific concepts. This fits the common assumption that proficiency in the employment of general terms is a criterion for the mastery of the relevant concepts: if Alfie is proficient with the English term ‘cat’, we can rest assured that he masters the concept CAT.

By the same token, acquiring new general terms brings with it the acquisition of the concepts they express. According to (5), then, enriching our vocabulary of general terms amounts to broadening the range of concepts we possess. A thinker can extend the range of her thoughts by learning how to master new general terms. For example, becoming proficient with the legal term ‘plaintiff’ or the astronomical term ‘meteor’ is a way to acquire the concepts PLAINTIFF or METEOR, respectively. It is often assumed that this is not a piecemeal matter. Just as understanding our term ‘cat’ is said to require understanding ‘animal’ and ‘living’ as well, the respective concepts are held to be acquired as a bundle rather than one by one. More importantly still, it appears that one can acquire sophisticated concepts only via linguistic proficiency. If this is true, then the range of our thoughts is bounded by the language we speak. This might well lead one to wonder whether having a language might not be necessary for thought in the first place. This suggests a controversial idea as to what concept-possession might involve: a thinker possesses a concept *C* *only if* she understands sentences comprising a term expressing *C*.

Turning finally to epistemology, we find that concepts figure in two ways in epistemic endeavours. If we are to trust (1) to (5), concepts are representational items guiding categorization in thought and language. But describing and explaining features of the world requires that we represent these features in language and thought in the first place. Hence, any theorizing about the world will rely on concepts as *means of representation*. But concepts have also been considered suitable *objects of analysis*. Although some think of it as dated, the view that doing philosophy involves analysing concepts is still held and defended (see Jackson 1998). Its champions obviously rely on the idea that

- (6) Thinkers possessing a concept can ascertain its constituent structure, or at least its intension, by mere reflection.

Advocates of conceptual analysis often presume that concepts such as PERSON or JUSTICE have constituent structure, and thus are inherently complex. But if conceptual analysis merely aims at specifying a term or

concept's intension (see Jackson, this volume), there is no need to assume this. What advocates of conceptual analysis need to presuppose is that mastery of a concept puts a thinker in a position to establish by mere reflection how or at least what the concept represents.

2. *Concepts in philosophy—divisive fundamental issues*

Combining the ideas (1) to (6) yields what we think of as the conventional picture of concepts (compare Burge 1993). On this picture, concepts are sub-components of thought as well as meanings of terms. Equating concepts with meanings locates concepts and thoughts on the level of contents. Understood thus, concepts such as CAT or JUSTICE are sub-components of thoughts by being sub-components of thought *contents*. They are mental representations in the sense of being part of *what* is thought. This amounts to what we think of as the *content-view of concepts* (see e.g. Evans 1982 or Glock, this volume).

The claim that thoughts and their parts are contents may seem tautological. But a major tradition in contemporary theorizing about concepts disagrees. Many philosophers and cognitive scientists employ talk of 'concepts' and 'thoughts' to refer to mental representations in the sense of structured mental particulars, often described to be words and sentences of a language of thought, that are the *bearers* or *vehicles* of contents, rather than the contents themselves. That is to say, they embrace what we call the *vehicle-view of concepts* (see e.g. Fodor 1998; 2008 or Margolis and Laurence 1999b).

The antagonism between the content-view and the vehicle-view has brought about a systematic ambiguity in the terms 'concept' and 'thought' as used in philosophy. As Margolis and Laurence (2006: §1.4) rightly note, proponents of the two views do not just squabble about terminology. Their divergent terminologies rather are a symptom of a substantial and deep disagreement about the right approach to the mind that manifests itself in the respective stance advocates of the two views take on a divisive fundamental issue. We call it the *issue of the level of explanation*:

Should we account for intentional mental states primarily in terms of contents of thoughts, or in terms of vehicles of thinking?

Traditionally, differences in belief states—or more generally: of intentional states involving the same kind of propositional attitude—have been explained in terms of differences in the contents involved. Suppose that Alfie believes that groundhogs are endearing, and he believes that woodchucks are endearing. An explanation of the relevant differences in terms of contents ascribes to Alfie two beliefs with different contents—a content containing the concept WOODCHUCK and a content containing the concept GROUNDHOG. Commitment to a language of thought affords a different explanation. Its advocates can hold that the differences between Alfie's groundhog-belief and his woodchuck-belief results from a difference in the vehicles of his thought: Alfie employs two different mental symbols to represent the same kind of animal. From this it is only a small step to identifying the concepts WOODCHUCK and GROUNDHOG with mental symbols bearing contents, rather than with the contents they bear. By the same token, advocates of a language of thought commonly identify a person's thoughts with sentence-like mental symbols bearing full propositional contents, rather than with the full propositional contents these symbols bear.

The highlighted difference in explanatory approach yields two points of disagreement between advocates of the content-view and champions of the vehicle-view. First, there is disagreement about the explanatory reach of a theory of concepts. Champions of the content-view are free to embrace the conventional picture of concepts in its entirety. They even are likely to regard all of (1) to (6) as platitudes defining the topic of concepts in the first place. By consequence, advocates of the content-view are likely to expect a theory of concepts to explain manifest properties of both thought *and* language. Advocates of the vehicle-view will also embrace (1) to (3), reading 'concept' and 'thought' as designating content-bearing mental vehicles (see e.g. Fodor 1998, Margolis and Laurence 1999b, 5—8). But since (4) straightforwardly identifies concepts with meanings and hence with contents, they cannot accept this idea. By consequence, advocates of the vehicle-view are likely to have less far-reaching expectations of a theory of concepts. Save for a friendly nod towards a Gricean programme of explaining meaningful speech in terms of intentional states, they will typically confine their explanatory aspirations to thought.

Secondly, there is disagreement about the idea of a medium of mental representation (see e.g. Stich and Warfield 1994). Advocates of the vehicle-view hold that thinking consists in the manipulation of re-combinable mental particulars having syntactic structure and bearing semantic contents.

Some of those who disagree grant that there is a medium of mental representation, but think that proponents of the vehicle-view have got its structure wrong. For example, they might hold that mental representation is map-like and hence holistic, rather than language-like and hence discrete (see Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson 2006, 177—184). Others dismiss the idea of a medium of thinking wholesale. Those who do so are prone to explain thinking in terms of abilities rather than in terms of content-bearing vehicles (see e.g. Evans 1982: §4.3 who follows the tradition of Geach 1957). By the same token, critics of the idea that there is a medium of thinking are prone to account not only for our cognitive feats, but also for linguistic proficiencies we describe in terms of ‘concepts’ by appeal to abilities (see Kenny and Glock, this volume).

There is a second divisive fundamental issue shaping much of the current debate on concepts. The issue we have in mind is that of *individualism vs. externalism*:

Should we hold that mental and linguistic contents are determined by intrinsic properties (as the individualist claims), or that they are (at least in many cases) determined by those substances and kinds in the thinker’s environment that she is suitably related to (as the externalist thinks)?

Both individualists and externalists actually hold rather more nuanced positions, but this sketch will do for our purposes (see Lau 2008, Mendola 2009, Rowlands 2003 and Segal 2000). Their disagreement is of importance to the topic of concepts. A thinker drawn to externalism is likely to hold specific views about the coarseness of contents. She will also most likely hold specific views about a thinker’s epistemic access to the contents of her thoughts. These views are prone to affect her ideas on the nature and role of concepts, and they are likely to influence her association with the content-view or the vehicle-view of concepts, respectively.

Let us begin with the issue of a thinker’s epistemic access to thought-contents. An individualist need not grant that a thinker can typically ascertain the constituent structure or at least the intensions of the complex concepts she employs. Still, none of her individualist commitments bars her from doing so. By contrast, the key tenets of externalism appear to commit externalists to holding that a thinker cannot establish the intensions of those of her complex concepts whose content is determined externally. Suppose that the content of Alfie’s thoughts he expresses with ‘woodchuck’-

sentences—his ‘woodchuck’-thoughts, for brevity—are determined by the fact that Alfie is suitably related to the woodchucks rather than to the hoary marmots in his environment. Had the animals he is suitably related to been hoary marmots, Alfie’s ‘woodchuck’-thought would have had hoary-marmot-contents. On these externalist premises, it is very hard to see how mere reflection could possibly put Alfie in a position to determine the contents of his ‘woodchuck’-thoughts in any informative way.

Turning to the issue of coarseness, the property of *being a woodchuck* just is the property of *being a groundhog*. So ‘Alfie believes that Joe owns a woodchuck’ and ‘Alfie believes that Joe owns a groundhog’ ascribe contents to Alfie in which the same property is predicated of the same individual. This could bring one to equate both contents with one and the same Russellian proposition $\langle \text{Joe, owning a woodchuck} \rangle$. However, the sentences ‘Joe owns a woodchuck’ and ‘Joe owns a groundhog’ differ in cognitive significance. For one can accept the one as true and reject the other as false. This might lead one to equate the first content ascribed to Alfie with the Fregean thought [*that Joe owns a woodchuck*] and the second content ascribed to Alfie with the different Fregean thought [*that Joe owns a groundhog*].

One expects externalists to opt for the Russellian view. Suppose you embrace the externalist idea that the contents of our ‘groundhog’- and ‘woodchuck’-thoughts and of our terms ‘groundhog’ and ‘woodchuck’ is fixed by the kinds of creatures we interact with. But there is just one kind of creature out there. Consequently, you seem bound to agree that ‘groundhog’ and ‘woodchuck’ have the same content. This generalizes: Given that externalists hold that contents as a rule do not cut finer than the kinds or properties interacted with, they are committed to a Russellian view of contents. By the same token, one expects individualists to harbour sympathies for Fregean thoughts. Since individualists hold that contents are determined by properties intrinsic to the thinker, rather than by the items interacted with, they might well agree that contents are more finely individuated than properties.

Advocates of the vehicle-view can honour individualist convictions (see Block 1986). Still, it is more important to note that a commitment to externalism will quite naturally bring a commitment to the vehicle-view in its wake. Just like everyone else, externalists typically agree that concepts constitute particular ways of thinking (as is claimed in (2) above). But ways of thinking are more finely individuated than kinds or properties, for we can think of the same kind or property in different ways. The concepts WOOD-

CHUCK and GROUNDHOG are cases in point. The externalist associates the same content with both concepts. Hence, he needs to look beyond contents to account for their difference. Embracing the idea of a structured medium of mental representation promises a solution, for it allows the externalist to trace the acknowledged differences in thinking to difference in the vehicles involved. Since on this view it is the vehicle that makes the difference between groundhog-thoughts and woodchuck-thoughts, it again seems natural to identify concepts with vehicles rather than with contents.

As has become clear, anyone committed to externalism will most likely deny the feasibility of conceptual analysis (at least for all of those terms or concepts whose contents she deems to be externally determined), embrace a Russellian understanding of content, and side with the vehicle-view of concepts. Hence, a commitment to externalism is indeed prone to affect a thinker's ideas on the nature and role of concepts. So both of the two fundamental divisive issues we have identified—the issue of the level of explanation and the issue of individualism *vs* externalism—affect if not shape the contemporary debate on concepts. After all, it is the noted ambiguity in ‘concept’ and ‘thought’ that makes the philosophical discussion on concepts appear heterogeneous, and it is the dissolution of the conventional picture of concepts along the lines of the two issues discussed that explains why the debate feels fragmented.

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