

Concepts

I. Introduction

What exactly is a concept? Is it some sort of mental representation, a purely psychological construct? Perhaps it is more an ability, e.g., the ability to discriminate between objects. It could be that it is neither of these things, and is something even more abstract.

These questions certainly are not new. They have been asked since antiquity, by many a philosopher. From that single sentence, it should be obvious that the topic of concepts is a broad and deep area of debate. This is likely because concepts, whatever form or structure that they may have, form perhaps the most basic and fundamental constructs in theories of mind. When one speaks of concepts, one is speaking of thoughts and ideas, which lie at the very core of the mind.

My goal, then, is not to provide answers to these questions. Philosophers have debated them for millennia, and it is highly unlikely that I can provide the answers in so small a space. Rather, I aim to provide an overview to the myriad theories and views that attempt to explain and describe concepts. My goal, ultimately, is to try and show where the debate stands and whether or not any sort of consensus exists.

To these ends, then, I will seek to show the various ideas about what a concept is. I will focus on three possibilities: concepts as mental representations, concepts as abilities and concepts as Fregean senses. I will then delve into the structure and make-up of the concepts themselves. There are many formulations, but I will focus on five. Those five are the Classical Theory of Concepts, the Prototype Theory of Concepts, the Theory-Theory of Concepts, the Neo-classical Theory of Concepts, and finally, Conceptual Atomism. It should be noted that the last four theories were developed as a response to the shortcomings in the Classical theory. These are the major areas of the debate on concepts, so knowing what is behind them will provide an excellent overview of concepts.

II. What is a concept?

a. Concepts as Mental Representation

The general view of concepts is that they are mental representations, i.e., they are psychological entities (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”). This view arises from the Representational Theory of the Mind (RTM), which posits that thought takes place in an internal representational system. Beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes are part of mental processes as internal symbols (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”).

How do concepts figure into RTM? Proponents of RTM take the representations involved in propositional attitudes have an internal structure. Theorists that hold concepts to be mental representations identify concepts with the aforementioned representations of RTM (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts” 1). The classic view holds that these representations have language-like syntax and have a compositional semantics (this view is held by Fodor). This type of structure would account for the fact that humans have the potential to consider an infinite number of thoughts (not all concepts are stored, but can be generated as needed from the syntactical/semantic structure as needed) (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”).

However, this view is not without its issues and critics. Critics argue that it is possible to have propositional attitudes without appropriately tokened representations in one’s mind. Daniel Dennett gives the example of “zebras don’t wear overcoats in the wild” (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”). This is a fact, and many people will believe it upon hearing it, but it is highly unlikely that anyone has at a prior time considered this. Other critics say that RTM itself is too close to common sense psychology and should therefore be abandoned entirely (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”).

b. **Concepts as Abilities**

In this view, concepts are not representations, but are rather abilities. For example, a concept could be explained in terms of discrimination. Margolis and Laurence in (“Concepts”) give an example of what the concept CAT might be in this case: the concept CAT amounts to the ability to discriminate cats from non-cats, and then being able to make inferences based on that discrimination.

This idea of concepts as abilities arises from the skepticism surrounding mental representations: even their very existence is debated. It is argued that mental representations re-introduce the problems they seek to explain, namely, the representation itself is something that needs explaining (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”). Michael Dummett provides an example: a person knows two languages, their native tongue and a second language. It is reasonable to explain knowledge of the second language in terms of knowledge of the first language. That is, knowledge of the second language is the translation of its words into those of the first. The problem arises when we attempt to explain knowledge of the first language. To speak of it in terms of the second language would be pointless, but translating it into a prior mental language also makes little sense (Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”). We see from this example, then, that mental representations can lead to an endless recursion, or require another representation on top of the existing mental representation.