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Individuating Concepts

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Concept possession vs. concept individuation

Which comes first, an account of concept individuation, or an account of concept possession? The Classical account has it that individuation comes first: concepts are individuated by what they are concepts *of*. But, as has been pointed out [Fodor, 1994], the Classical approach is an infamous and spectacular failure: either the relation between concepts and what they are of is stipulated, making it a mystery how we could possess such things, or it is substantive, yet no account of this relation has been given.

Thus, cognitive science has rejected Classicism. But despite its problems, Fodor claims it is still preferable to anti-Classicism (also called Pragmatism), which denies that concept individuation comes first. I present and reject Fodor's arguments against two anti-Classical positions – Behavioristic and Definitional Pragmatism – as well as his argument (from compositionality) against Pragmatism in general.

Behaviouristic Pragmatism

Behaviouristic Pragmatism holds that the criteria for concept possession are “expressed in the vocabulary of behavior and/or in the vocabulary of dispositions to behave” [Fodor, 1994, p 101], typically sorting behaviour.

Fodor's main argument against this approach is: given that the two kinds of (broadly-individuated) sorting behaviour “look the same” (e.g., triangle sorting and trilateral sorting), a Behaviourist can use them differentially in giving an account of concept possession (e.g., the concept TRIANGLE vs. the concept TRILATERAL) only if some account is given of the differences between the sorting behaviours themselves. Otherwise, the Behaviouristic reduction has not been completed. Yet such an account can only be given in terms of dispositions to infer, which violates Behaviourism's restriction to non-mentalistic explanations. I argue that a Behaviouristic Pragmatist need not be a reductionist; and furthermore, one need not reduce the difference between sorting behaviours to differences in inferential dispositions; one might reduce them to, e.g., differences in linguistic behaviour.

Definitional Pragmatism

Definitional Pragmatism holds that “Having the concept *X* just is being able to sort *X*s and being disposed to draw the inferences that *define X-ness*” [Fodor, 1994, p 104]. Fodor's

objection, that most concepts don't have definitions, is based on the undefinability of linguistic concepts, and thus assumes a tight connection between language and thought. Instead, I suggest that we make a distinction between communicative content and cognitive content. Concisely: we don't speak our minds. The essential publicity of linguistic content is the source of its undefinability. Mental concepts, being governed by norms other than inter-subjective use, can be individuated definitionally. Or at least Fodor has not shown that they can't.

If mental concepts are distinct from linguistic ones, as I claim, the standard means of specifying a concept (provide a natural language expression that means that concept) cannot work; some alternative means is necessary. I have proposed some alternatives elsewhere [Chrisley, 1995].

Mere compositionality

A virtue of Definitional Pragmatism is that the concepts it individuates are compositional: “a constituent concept contributes the same content to all complex representations it occurs in” [Fodor, 1994, p 107]. This is a virtue because compositionality (and, if Fodor is right, it alone) can explain the productivity and systematicity of thought. But, Fodor notes, there are inferences which we make about, say, green apples that do not follow just from their being green and from their being apples. Thus Definitional Pragmatism, being merely compositional, cannot explain the possession of the concept GREEN APPLE.

My reply is that a Definitional Pragmatist need not hold that *all* of one's dispositions to infer things concerning green apples are definitional; not all need be explained by the possession of the concept GREEN APPLE. No doubt Fodor believes otherwise because he fails to acknowledge an analytic/synthetic distinction. But to ask the Definitional Pragmatist to reject that distinction would be to beg the question.

References

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