

Julia Langkau and Christian Nimtz, eds.
New Perspectives on Concepts.
Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi 2010.
257 pages
US\$72.00 (paper ISBN 978-90-420-3018-3)

This volume contains essays first presented at three international workshops on the nature of concepts. It proposes to address three central questions: 1) is mastery of a language necessary for thought? 2) do concepts reduce to abilities? and 3) is the analysis of concepts a viable means to ascertain truths from the proverbial armchair? (1). These questions have long engaged philosophers, and the editors aim to offer a ‘new perspective’ on them by taking on a more ‘encompassing’ approach than that attempted in previous work. The stated goal is to break out of the dominant paradigm that was ‘inspired by, and was developed within, the bounds of the representational theory of mind’ (ibid.).

To set the stage, the editors provide a brief characterization of the ‘conventional’ view of concepts and identify six defining tenets: (a) concepts are sub-components of thoughts; (b) concepts are representational and determine intensions; (c) concepts guide categorization; (d) concepts are the meanings of (general) sub-sentential expressions; (e) concepts are pivotal to the understanding of language; and (f) thinkers possessing a concept can ascertain its constituent structure, or at least its intension, by mere reflection (2-5). According to the editors, these tenets have recently fallen out of favor with theorists. Due to certain ‘divisive’ issues, such as the dispute over whether to locate concepts at the level of content or that of vehicle and the individualism vs. externalism debate on conceptual content, many theorists have rejected one or more of these tenets. For instance, a content externalist will not hold that concepts can be analyzed by mere reflection on the intrinsic properties of a thinker. The collapse of the conventional view of concepts thus generates a sense that the ‘philosophical debate on concepts in general appears heterogeneous and feels fragmented’ (2). The thirteen essays that make up this volume are meant to illustrate alternative approaches that can facilitate theorizing about concepts.

The first set of essays inquires whether, and, if so, to what extent, thought is dependent on language. Reiterating the central thesis in his 1994 book *Making It Explicit*, Robert Brandom points out that the conceptual content of states, expressions, and performances are inferentially articulated and conferred by discursive (hence, linguistic) practices, which he argues to be constituted by six consequential relations governing our various commitments and entitlements. Jose Luis Bermudez agrees with Brandom’s conclusion that conceptual content is dependent on linguistic practices, but argues instead that the relevant content-fixing inferential relations are determined by the internal structure of thoughts, which can be made perspicuous when expressed in public language sentences. Two other essays represent the opposing side of the debate. Martine Nida-Rumelin argues that thinking in the broadest sense (e.g., attending to contents, goal-directed thinking, and rational thinking) is possible for non-linguistic creatures because it

encompasses cognitive activities that do not require either verbalization or the possession of a language. Lastly, Hannes Rakoczy notes that no current views, including ‘Lingualism’ and LOT theories, can adequately account for the emergence and the development of thought. What is needed is a theory that can provide a dialectical picture that suitably locates various kinds of cognitive abilities: pre-linguistic ones found in humans and some animals, others that are dependent on language, and still others that can be ‘transformed’ by language.

The next set of essays addresses the issue of whether concepts reduce to abilities. Anthony Kenny returns a positive answer. The mind, he argues, should not be identified with either its behaviors or the brain. Instead, it ought to be viewed as a general capacity, which he calls ‘a comprehensive ability to acquire abilities’ (105). In his view, to possess these abilities is to possess concepts. In contrast, Hans-Johann Glock argues against the suggestion that concepts are abilities and proposes that they are best construed as ‘ways of thinking’ about objects. Though this construal of concepts seems to run into what he calls the ‘propositional problem’, he claims that a solution is at hand: Concepts can still be thought of as constituents of propositions if they are treated not as genuine objects but as non-reductive logical constructions of what we say or do. The third essay in this section, by Sebastian Rodl, argues that an adequate disjunctive account of experience must unite (veridical) perceptions and illusions and that perception takes priority over illusion in the context of knowledge. The key is to appeal to what he calls the ‘self-conscious power of sensory knowledge’. The last essay, by Katia Saporoti, sounds a cautionary note about philosophical attempts to provide blanket definitions of what concepts are. She argues that problems arise when such a definitional exercise is pursued independently of one’s theoretical background, interests and purpose. For those who insist on talking about concepts in non-committal terms, she advocates a deflationary account in which concepts are nothing but abstractions of how words are used.

The last group of essays concerns the legitimacy of employing conceptual analysis as a method to obtain truths. Frank Jackson leads off with a discussion of how a representationalist might think of conceptual analysis. In his view, perceptual experience is directed at the world with the purpose of representing certain patterns in nature. The goal of analyzing concepts, then, is to come up with a ‘series of words’ that pick out each of these patterns and specify its structure. Conceptual analysis is thus a linguistic ability. Next, Christian Nimitz argues that philosophical thought experiments are fundamentally exercises in analyzing concepts. In order to assess the counterfactuals used in these thought experiments, we need to make explicit the notions involved in their antecedents, which can be done by reflecting *a priori* on their possible applications. So far, both of Jackson and Nimitz’s accounts of conceptual analysis require a neo-descriptivist theory of semantics. But is such a semantics defensible? In his paper, Finn Spicer offers a negative answer. According to him, the purported explanatory benefits to which Jackson and Nimitz appeal in order to motivate neo-descriptivism can already be found in the Kripkean non-descriptivist account. The last essay, by Mark Textor, discusses Frege’s attempt to extend the scope of our *a priori* arithmetical knowledge by answering the question of what a natural number is. To do so, Textor argues that Frege can turn to

propositional, as opposed to conceptual, analysis as a rational method to recognize that different ‘impure’ sentences can express the same thought.

This collection of essays should be useful to those with an interest in any of the three questions noted at the start of this review. Familiar as the issues may be, the authors show that the debates on them are still very much vibrant and relevant today. They also demonstrate that there is room for alternative positions, given the heterogeneous and fragmented state of contemporary philosophical study on concepts. In this regard, Brandom’s Inferentialism and Glock’s cognitivist approach deserve special attention for their promise of fresh and useful insights. I end this review with a warning to readers who may be drawn to this volume by the comprehensiveness suggested by the wording of the title. Conspicuously missing from this collection is any substantive discussion of psychological theories of concepts and their philosophical implications. In the end, the ‘encompassing’ approach as intended by the editors still falls short. Such an omission, I suspect, may be explained by the fact that psychological theories fall squarely under the representationalist paradigm and, as such, are not deemed distinctive enough to deserve separate treatment. This is unfortunate, as much of the recent exciting work on the nature of concepts has stemmed precisely from discussions that recognize the contributions of psychological research (e.g., Prinz’s Concept Empiricism, Machery’s Eliminativism, and Weiskopf’s Pluralism).

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