Wittgenstein on Concepts

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There is a long list of titles of the form ‘Wittgenstein on $X$’. There is a somewhat less long list of cases in which the $X$ is replaced by an unexpected noun. My title falls into that second category, though not squarely. I shall explain why in the first section, where I expound the exegetical importance of my topic and list claims about concepts that can be found in Wittgenstein’s later work. Section 2 indicates why the topic is also significant from a substantive perspective. It distinguishes five urgent philosophical questions about concepts—the definition question, the possession question, the priority question, the individuation question and the function question—and introduces Wittgenstein’s answers. The next two sections approvingly discuss two of these answers—namely that a philosophical account of what concepts are ought to start with an exploration of concept-possession (sct. 3) and that the latter is a special kind of ability (sct. 4). Section 5 rejects the Wittgensteinian proposal that concepts can be equated with abilities and section 6 does the same with Wittgenstein’s own suggestion that they can be equated with techniques or rules. The final section turns to the individuation question. While concepts cannot be equated with word-meanings, they are individuated along the same lines. An adequate criterion for the identity of concepts emerges through combining Frege’s idea of cognitive equivalence with Wittgenstein’s idea that meaning is determined by explanation. All in all, Wittgenstein has made an important—though not definitive—contribution to our understanding of concepts, especially through delineating connections between concepts and concept-possession on the one hand, and linguistic meaning, understanding and explanation on the other.
1. **The Exegetical Importance of the Topic**

Prima facie, linking Wittgenstein to the topic of concepts is hardly sensational. For one thing, Wittgenstein is widely associated with the historical movement of conceptual analysis, and for good reasons. The *Tractatus* was a major starting point for the Cambridge analysts of the 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, following his return to Britain in 1929 Wittgenstein became the major inspiration behind a movement which is often misleadingly referred to as ‘ordinary language’ or ‘Oxford philosophy’. The philosophers concerned rightly preferred labels such as ‘linguistic philosophy’ or ‘conceptual analysis’. For, like Wittgenstein, they regarded philosophical problems as conceptual and concepts as embodied in language. Again like Wittgenstein, but unlike ‘ideal language philosophers’, the conceptual analysts tried to resolve philosophical problems not through constructing artificial languages but through clarifying our existing conceptual framework (see Glock 2008: ch. II.5; Hacker 1996: chs. 4 & 6).

For another thing, it is widely presumed that there is a Wittgensteinian account of concepts. Thus Bamborough (1960-1) suggested that the notion of family resemblance is meant to provide a general solution to the problem of universals and thereby of concepts. Wittgenstein allegedly pointed out that different instances have more in common than merely being called ‘F’; against realism, that what they share is just their being *F*, not an additional common property. Bamborough’s proposal distorts the idea of a common property: being *F* is not a property *by virtue of which* something qualifies as being *F* (although it may be a property by virtue of which something qualifies as being *G*, etc.). Indeed, this is precisely the kind of distortion Wittgenstein actually inveighed against in defending his suggestion that the concept of a game is held together not by a property common to *all and only* games, but by overlapping similarities. He considers the response that our concept of a game is explained by reference to a common property, but that this property is the *disjunction* of all the resemblances covering the family. Wittgenstein dismisses such a move as a mere ‘playing with words’ (PI §67). Unlike a genuine analytic definition it does not provide a standard for
the correct use of ‘game’ independently of the overlapping similarities. Moreover, it does not distinguish the case of ‘game’, in which the resemblances are themselves recognizably related, and which therefore can be applied to an open class of new cases, from artificially constructed disjunctive concepts (e.g. of being either a member of parliament or a cane toad).

A more recent development of Wittgenstein’s idea of family-resemblance is the ‘prototype theory’ of concepts (Rosch and Mervis1975; Smith and Medin 1981). Prototype theory is an empirical hypothesis about how human subjects operate with concepts. Contrary to the so-called ‘classical theory’, it contends, subjects do not associate specific concepts with a defining set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions; rather, they think of paradigmatic ‘exemplars’ or ‘prototypes’.

Unfortunately, prototype theorists rarely keep apart psychological and semantic issues, notably the empirical description of the process of conceptual thinking on the one hand and the analysis of the content of concepts on the other. By contrast, Wittgenstein distinguishes sharply between the things a subject associates with a concept and the explanations of it that they could offer or would accept: only the latter contribute to the content of the subject’s thinking and speaking (see sct. 3). Prototype theorists also tend to apply their model to all concepts. Persistent rumours to the contrary notwithstanding, Wittgenstein himself did not claim that all concepts are family resemblance concepts. In fact his account implies that at least some branches of certain family resemblance concepts are united by necessary and sufficient conditions. Thus the various types of numbers—natural, rational, real, complex numbers, etc.—cannot be defined by a common property, but form a family tree which can be variously extended. At the same time each such extension is precisely defined (PG 70; PI §135; see Glock 1996: 120-4). Equally, there are analytic definitions for some scientific concepts (PLP 93-4, 183), and to this one could add legal concepts and everyday concepts like that of a grandmother.
This problem of scope does not affect Wittgensteinian accounts of concepts which are inspired by his reflections on meaning rather than family resemblance. Thus Tugendhat (1982) has combined Wittgensteinian and Strawsonian ideas to show that for general terms to have meaning is for them to express concepts, and that they do so by virtue of being used according to rules of classification. And Peacocke refers to Wittgenstein’s ideas about concepts both approvingly and critically (see 1992: ix, chs. 2, 7).

It is ironical, therefore, that neither the Oxford conceptual analysts nor Wittgenstein seem to have explicitly discussed the nature of concepts or Begriffe at great length. Ryle and Strawson are better-known for claims about categories, category-mistakes and conceptual analysis than about the nature of concepts. Similarly, Wittgenstein is better-known for remarks on special types of concepts—formal concepts in the Tractatus and family-resemblance concepts in the Investigations—than about concepts simpliciter. While there are theories of concepts inspired by Wittgenstein, I know of no scholarly interpretation of his own views concerning the nature of concepts. There is a straightforward excuse for this failure, namely that these views are hard to pinpoint. With two exceptions. The first is material from the early 1930s—especially dictations to Waismann and Schlick; the second is material from his final period. In these passages Wittgenstein discusses the nature of concepts explicitly and at some length. What is more, he links it to central topics of his later work, notably meaning, understanding, rules and the nature of philosophy. These ideas have not been appreciated sufficiently by scholars. My essay is an attempt to fill this lacuna.

2. The Substantive Importance of the Topic

Here are some claims about concepts that one can garner from Wittgenstein’s later oeuvre:

First, concepts give rise to philosophical, i.e. ‘conceptual’ problems. Thus Zettel §458 assigns to philosophy conceptual rather than factual problems and their resolution. Conversely, it is
constitutive of ‘metaphysics’—i.e. misguided philosophy—that it confuses factual and conceptual issues, notably empirical propositions about reality with ‘grammatical propositions’, which articulate our conceptual scheme.

Secondly, concepts can be analysed, namely through analysing the ‘application’ of words (PI §383). As regards colours, Wittgenstein promises us no ‘theories of colours (neither physiological nor psychological)’, but instead the ‘logic of colour concepts’ (ROC I §122). Colour-exclusion statements like ‘Nothing can be red and green all over’ are not based on either the physiology of colour perception or on an essential feature of colour experience. Rather, they result from linguistic rules that exclude a sentence like ‘This object is simultaneously red and green all over’ as nonsensical (see Glock 1996: 83-4). For this reason, a phenomenological analysis of the kind sought by Goethe and Husserl must turn out to be a ‘conceptual analysis’ (ROC II §16). As part of such analysis we compare and contrast (establish analogies, disanalogies, implications and exclusions between) concepts, for instance between the concepts of knowing, believing, and being certain (OC §§8, 21).

Thirdly, ‘our concepts reflect our life’ (ROC III §302). They are both ‘expressions of our interest, and direct our interest’ (PI §570). What concepts we employ depends on our cognitive requirements, notably on what distinctions we find it imperative or expedient to draw. Conversely, the way in which we conceptualize things can also shape what differences we notice or regard as important and what sort of things we can take an interest in.

Fourthly, ‘concept formation’ (Begriffsbildung) is not dictated by any putative essence of reality. ‘Grammar’, aka our conceptual scheme, is autonomous in an important respect. While it may be partly shaped by pragmatic constraints, it cannot be correct or incorrect in a metaphysical sense (e.g. PI II.xii).

These claims are of considerable substantive interest (see Glock 1996: 203-8, 292-8, 45-51 Hacker 1986: ch. VII; Forster 2004). In this essay, however, I shall focus instead on Wittgenstein’s less well-known contribution to the debate about the nature of concepts.
Throughout the long history of philosophy’s concern with concepts, one can detect a pervasive contrast between two fundamentally opposed conceptions of concepts. On the one hand, we find objectivist positions, according to which concepts exist independently of individual human minds, e.g. as abstract objects or abstractions from linguistic practices. On the other hand, we find subjectivist positions, according to which concepts are phenomena in the minds or brains of individuals.

The most prominent contemporary version of subjectivism is the representational theory of mind championed by Fodor. Its central claim is that concepts are ‘mental particulars’, objects that are literally ‘in the head’ of individuals which have causes and effects in the physical world (e.g. 1998: 3; 2003: 13+n). Fodor portrays his objectivist opponents as part of a conspiracy, which includes Ryle, Wittgenstein, neo-Fregeans, inferential role semanticists, and holists of various sorts. He labels this conspiracy ‘pragmatism’, because it links concepts to inferential rules and abilities rather than to inner goings-on. And he has pronounced pragmatism to be ‘perhaps the worst idea that philosophy ever had’ (2008: 9).

Given the high profile of Fodor’s Manichean struggle and Wittgenstein’s designated role as arch ‘pragmatist’, it is important to establish and assess what he actually had to say about the matter. In doing so, however, we must keep in mind the methodological aims of Wittgenstein’s remarks. The latter are to be measured not against the speculations and stipulations of contemporary cognitive scientists, but against the established use of ‘concept’ or Begriff, both in everyday life and in specialized forms of discourse such as history of ideas, psychology, logic and philosophy. Furthermore, I shall confine myself to concepts associated with general terms (predicates).

Although Fodor’s taxonomy is problematic, Wittgenstein and Ryle can be regarded as pragmatists about concepts in a loose sense. The gist of their approach can be summed up as follows: To possess a concept is to know the meaning of certain expressions; by the same
token, concepts are neither mental occurrences nor entities beyond space and time, but abstractions from our use of words. To reach more specific interpretations and assessments, we need to distinguish five philosophical questions that can be raised about concepts:

- **Definition question:** What are concepts?
- **Individuation question:** How are concepts individuated?
- **Possession question:** What is it to have a concept?
- **Function question:** What is the role of concepts?

Once we keep apart these four questions, one further question arises:

- **Priority question:** Which of these questions—definition, individuation, possession or function—is the most fundamental?

Now for the answers that one can find, more or less explicitly, in Wittgenstein’s later oeuvre.

**Priority question:** The question of what it is to possess a concept is prior to the question of what concepts are, in that it provides a better starting-point for elucidating the nature of concepts.

**Possession:** Concept-possession is a particular kind of ability. To possess a concept is to have mastered the use of an expression.

**Individuation:** Concepts are as finely individuated as word-meanings, yet it is left open how fine that is.

**Definition:** Concepts are techniques of using words.

**Function:** The role of concepts is to allow classification and inference.

In the remaining sections I shall discuss these answers.

### 3. The Priority Question

Wittgenstein neither poses nor answers this question explicitly. Nevertheless, his methodological remarks on the connection between meaning, understanding and explanation
are ultimately responsible for the fact that the importance of this question is recognized in contemporary debates about concepts.

It is well known that Wittgenstein objected to the Socratic quest for definitions. ‘I cannot characterize my standpoint better than by saying that it is opposed to that which Socrates represents in the Platonic dialogues’ (VW 32). But it has yet to be appreciated that there are several facets to this opposition. First, Wittgenstein transposed the Socratic questions from a metaphysical onto a linguistic plane. The answer to Socratic ‘What is X?’-questions is given not by inspecting natures or essences (abstract or mental objects), but by clarifying the meaning of ‘X’, which is determined by the rules for the use of ‘X’ (see PI §§371, 383). Secondly, he resisted the idea that ‘What is’-questions can only be answered by providing analytic definitions in terms of conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient (VW 32-3; PG 120-1; BB 17-20; PI §§64-88). Socrates was right to ask e.g. ‘What is virtue?’, yet wrong to reject partial explanations and explanations by exemplification or analogies. Finally, in some contexts Wittgenstein proposed that one Socratic question ought to be replaced by another one, a move from ‘What is X?’ to ‘What is Y?’. This move is an option even for cases in which X is not a family-resemblance concept. It is also independent of Wittgenstein’s contentious claim that giving examples qualifies as a kind of explanation.

The most perspicuous example of this replacement manoeuvre is Wittgenstein’s advice: ‘Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use!’ (reported in Wisdom 1952: 258). This slogan was intended as a methodological recipe for dealing with philosophically contentious terms in general. For instance, instead of asking ‘What does “knowledge” mean?’ we are urged to ask ‘How is “knowledge” used?’ But in justifying this methodological recipe, Wittgenstein connects it to a specific move concerning the notion of meaning itself. The very term ‘the meaning of …’ misleads us, since its nominal form suggests an object beyond the
sign. For Wittgenstein, by contrast, the concept of meaning is obsolete save for expressions such as ‘means the same’ or ‘has no meaning’ (M 52; AWL 30).

Furthermore, the switch to use is not the only reorientation Wittgenstein recommends, once more with respect both to meaning in general and to the meaning of ‘meaning’ in particular.

What is the meaning of a word? Let us attack this question by asking, first, what is an explanation of the meaning of a word; what does the explanation of a word look like. The way this question helps us is analogous to the way the question ‘how do we measure a length?’ helps us to understand the problem ‘what is length?’. The questions ‘What is length?’, ‘What is meaning?’, ‘What is the number one?’ etc. produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can’t point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (BB 1; see PG 68-9)

Finally, this move to the explanation of meaning draws in its wake a further widening of the horizon, namely to linguistic understanding. The meaning of ‘X’ is both what is explained by an explanation of ‘X’ and what one understands when one understands ‘X’ and its explanation (see BT 11; PG 45, 60; PI §560). And like the capacity to use ‘X’, the capacity to explain ‘X’ is a criterion for understanding ‘X’. That is why in lectures from the thirties Wittgenstein utilized the question ‘What is it to understand a general term such as “plant”?’ as one of the remedies against the urge to reify meanings (Wisdom 1952: 258).

The connections Wittgenstein draws between meaning, explanation and understanding have been elucidated thoroughly by Baker and Hacker. ‘Meaning is what is explained in giving an explanation of meaning … It is the correlate of understanding, and explanation is the correlate of understanding’ (2005: 29). For his part, Dummett has maintained that a theory of meaning for a natural language must be a theory of understanding, one which yields a theoretical model of what competent speakers know when they understand an expression of that language. This claim is much more remote from both the letter and the spirit of Wittgenstein’s writings. Nevertheless, Dummett is motivated by the same refocusing from meaning to understanding: ‘Philosophical questions about meaning are best interpreted as
questions about understanding: a dictum about what the meaning of an expression consists in must be construed as a thesis about what it is to know its meaning’ (1993: 14).

Dummett links this perspective on meaning to one on concepts. To explain the concept expressed by an expression is to explain the meaning of that expression. And he tacitly moves from the project of explaining the concepts expressed by the expressions of a language to the project of explaining what it is for a speaker to possess these concepts (see 1993: viii, 4-6). In a more explicit vein, Peacocke’s ‘principle of dependence’ runs: ‘there can be nothing more to the nature of a concept than is determined by a correct account of the capacity of a thinker to what it is to possess that concept’. Peacocke characterizes this as ‘the concept-theoretic analogue of one of Dumett’s principles about language …. As a theory of meaning should be a theory of understanding, so a theory of concepts should be a theory of concept possession’ (1992: 5; see ix).

Overall we are presented with two parallel moves—from meaning to understanding and from concepts to concept-possession. Leaving theoretical aspirations aside, Wittgenstein should welcome this strategy. The dictations to Waismann proffer as ‘the real doctrine of concepts’ (die eigentliche Lehre vom Begriff): ‘the meaning of a word is constituted by the rules for its employment’. And they occasionally switch not just from word-meaning to concept but also from understanding words to understanding concepts, notably regarding the concept of an integral, which obviously cuts across different natural languages (VW 142, 466).

In spelling out the idea underlying the two replacements, we once more need to keep apart two tasks which are intertwined by the aforementioned authors, Wittgenstein included: the task of elucidating specific word-meanings or concepts on the one hand, and that of elucidating the meaning of ‘meaning’ or the concept of a concept on the other. We also need to recognize that the strategy for dealing with meaning that we find in the Blue Book incorporates two distinct steps. First, what I called replacement: Wittgenstein switches from
the original *explanandum* to another notion which is not offered as a direct *explanans*, but which is illuminatingly related to the former—let’s call it the *illuminans*. In our case, he switches from meaning to explanation.  

Secondly, he operationalizes the *illuminans* and thereby the *explanandum*. So we move not just from ‘What is length?’ to ‘What is it to measure the length of a body?’, but from there to ‘*How* do we measure the length of a body?’. Analogously, we move not just from ‘What is meaning?’ to ‘What is an explanation of meaning?’ or ‘What is it to explain the meaning of a word?’, but from the latter to ‘*How* do we explain the meaning of a word?’.

The replacement strategy revolves around the following contrast. On the one hand, we have a direct or Socratic approach. It seeks explicit definitions through questions like

- What is the meaning of an expression?
- What are concepts?
- What is $X$?

On the other hand, we have a contextualist or Wittgensteinian approach which switches to analogous questions like:

- What is it to understand the meaning of an expression?
- What is it to have a concept?
- What is it to know $X$?

As a response, it expects implicit or contextual definitions of the original *explanandum*.

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1 Like an explication à la Carnap and Quine, an *illuminans* à la Wittgenstein does not purport to be synonymous to its original *explanandum*. But unlike an explication, the *illuminans* is meant to *shed light on* rather than to *replace* the original.
Fodor has rejected this indirect approach to the nature of concepts (his specific target being Dummett). One of his central gripes against pragmatism is that it reverses the ‘classical direction of analysis’. Instead of starting out with an explanation of ‘what it is to be the concept $X$, … the concept’s identity conditions’, they start out with an account of ‘the conditions for having concept $X$’. Fodor concedes that it is a grammatical truism that accounts of concepts and of concept-possession must be interconvertible: ‘if you know what an $X$ is you also know what it is to have an $X$. And ditto the other way around’. Still, he insists that ‘an explanation of concept possession should be parasitic on an explanation of concept individuation’, just as an account of ‘knowing the meaning of a word’ should be parasitic on an account of ‘being the meaning of a word’. For there is a general priority of ‘metaphysical’ over ‘epistemological’ issues: ‘… understanding what a thing is, is invariably prior to understanding how we know what it is’ (1998: 2-3, 5; 2003: 11).

Appearances notwithstanding, however, there are good reasons for reversing these priorities. Socratic ‘What is…?’-questions have a notorious tendency to lead to aporias or ‘mental cramps’. What is more, this tendency seems to be unaffected by the switch from the material mode, i.e. questions of the form ‘What is the essence or nature of $F$’, to the formal mode, i.e. questions of the form ‘What does “$F$” mean?’. Ironically, Fodor should be sympathetic to this line. After all, he opines hyperbolically though not without some justice that ‘the number of concepts whose analyses have thus far been determined continues to hover stubbornly around none’ (2003: 6).

But what grounds do we have for hoping that the indirect approach might fare better? Consider the following pairs of questions:

1. What is a mortgage?

2. What is it for someone to be legally obliged to do something?
What is a disease?

What is it for someone to suffer from a disease?

It is not just that the indirect questions are easier to answer than the direct ones. These answers also shed much needed light on the direct questions. Wittgenstein hints at two reasons for this. First, the indirect approach avoids the dangers of reification already mentioned. The contextualist questions are easier to answer than the ‘What is…?’-questions because the noun-phrases derive their content from non-nominal constructions. We talk about diseases because organisms display similar symptoms as a result of similar physiological states. Secondly, and relatedly, the contextualist move ‘takes us back to the rough ground’ (PI §107). Unlike general conditions, diseased organisms are something concrete and directly observable.

Wittgenstein’s indirect approach to meaning/concepts goes in a different direction. Its first step—the replacement—introduces an illuminans with an epistemic dimension—understanding and concept-possession, respectively. This epistemic dimension in turn provides a rationale for the second step—the operationalization. Understanding or concept-possession manifest themselves in behaviour and can hence be ascertained by ordinary speakers. Unfortunately, this idea is resisted by cognitive scientists on the one hand and realist semanticists on the other. Thus Fodor suspects that the insistence on the manifestability of understanding is fuelled by ‘atavistic sceptical anxieties about communication’ (1998: 5). But this suspicion ignores that at least in our case the explanandum itself has an intrinsic epistemic dimension, one to which the illuminans draws attention.

It is part and parcel of the established notion of linguistic meaning that the meaning of an expression is known to competent speakers who have mastered that expression. This need not mean that they can spontaneously proffer an optimal explanation of that expression. But it means two things: they must be capable of explaining it in some way, e.g. by exemplification
or analogy; and they must be capable of recognizing an explanation if it is offered to them by discerning linguists or conceptual analysts (see Glock 2003: 244-9).

Its current popularity notwithstanding, the idea that meaning might transcend what competent speakers are capable of manifesting in behaviour ignores the dependence of meaning on practice. Words do not have linguistic meaning intrinsically, as a matter of arcane factors accessible exclusively to scientists, but only because speakers use and explain them in a certain way (see BB 27-8). Therefore it is simply absurd to suggest that our term ‘teddy-bear’, for instance, has a real meaning, and might, for all normal speakers know, refer to a type of super-nova. The meaning of an expression simply is what competent speakers understand, and what they explain to neophytes. By a similar token, what speakers say in using expressions simply is what those who understand their utterances grasp. Any account which opens the floodgates to semantic scepticism straightforwardly misses the concept of meaning. Hidden factors are idle wheels, semantically speaking. Those who hanker for them are really after the causes of our beliefs and utterances, which may indeed be unknown.

It is part of the concept of a concept that concepts are known (mastered or grasped) by those who possess and employ them. Furthermore, what concepts subjects possess or employ is manifest in their cognitive and linguistic operations and achievements, especially in how they employ and explain the corresponding terms. Therefore we can establish what concepts a subject possesses or employs by looking at her cognitive and linguistic activities and at the way she justifies and explains them. At a more general level we can establish what it is to possess a concept by looking at the grounds on which we ascribe concepts, at our criteria for concept-possession.
4. Concept-Possession

Let us apply these lessons to the possession-question. Wittgenstein and Ryle identify having a concept with the possession of an ability, capacity or disposition. That stance is clearly underwritten by our criteria for concept-possession or linguistic understanding. We credit subjects with concepts not on the basis of (mental or neurological) goings-on, processes accompanying intelligent behaviour or communication, but on account of what they are capable of doing.

Wittgenstein elaborates these points in the context of his discussion of linguistic understanding. His negative line of reasoning is familiar (see Glock 1996: 179-84, 372-6). Conceptually speaking, neither mental nor physical processes or states are either necessary or sufficient for understanding. Wittgenstein’s alternative, however, is less clear-cut. In the dictations to Waismann, he seems happy to contend that understanding is a disposition, while wavering on the question of whether that disposition is a state of the subject, namely its physiological structure. Thus he characterizes understanding a word as ‘a disposition to use this word’ (WV 358, 368 440). This suggests a behaviourist position susceptible to the obvious objection that one can understand a word—for instance an obscenity or faddish slogan—without being in the least disposed to use it. In other passages, he explains the idea that understanding is a disposition in a more fruitful fashion, namely as a Vermögen (capacity) or Können (ability), something linked to the auxiliary ‘can’. More circumspectly still, he settles for the claim that ‘there is a kinship between the grammar of “can”, “is able to” and that of “understands the meaning”’. ‘The question “Do you understand this word” is much closer to “Can you operate with this word?” than to “What process occurs in you on hearing the word?”’ (VW 356-8, 440-2, 464-5; see also AWL 92; PLP 346). ‘Understanding a word can mean: knowing, how it is used; being able to apply it’ (PG 47).

This avenue seems most congenial to the mature later work. Thus Wittgenstein maintains that the grammar of ‘know’ is ‘evidently closely related’ to that of ‘can’ and ‘is
able to’ on the one hand, and to ‘understand’ on the other, as well as the pregnant suggestion that the latter is “‘mastery’ of a technique’ (PI §150). Understanding a word is, or is akin to, an ability, one which manifests itself in three ways: i) how one uses it; ii) how one responds to its use by others; iii) how one explains what it means when asked (see PI §§75, 317, 363, 501-10; LFM 19-28).

Wittgenstein now denies that understanding is a ‘mental state’ with genuine duration (see Baker/Hacker 2005: 371-5), even though the pertinent passage from the Investigations is misleading. But his attitude towards the claim that understanding is a disposition remains ambivalent. On the one hand, in PI §149 he explicitly relegates dispositions to physiological states of the subject underlying its performances, and denies that understanding is such a state. On the other hand, he continues to assimilate understanding to a disposition in order to highlight the contrast with ‘states of consciousness’ like being in pain that possess genuine duration and which can be ascertained by the subject without spot-checking (Z §§72, 82, 672-5; RPP II §§45, 57, 243).

Be that as it may, in both the intermediate and the later period Wittgenstein approaches concept-possession along the same lines as linguistic understanding. Negatively, this applies to the contrast with mental representations. There may be representations (Vorstellungen) that typically accompany understanding a particular expression—Wittgenstein is primarily thinking of mental images here. But these do not determine what speakers understand. They do not even distinguish ‘concepts’ from sentences. ‘The truth of the matter is that a representation can represent a concept on one occasion, a sentence on another’ (VW 460). Positively, it applies to linking concept-possession with an ability. More specifically, Wittgenstein links concept-possession with mastery of language-games. ‘Whoever cannot play this game [establishing the colour of an object by looking at it] doesn’t have this [colour] concept’ (ROC III §115, see §§112-24). As in the case of understanding,
Moreover, Wittgenstein stresses that this ability is acquired through teaching and learning—a point obvious to everyone save inveterate nativists.

Even though Wittgenstein ultimately fails to clarify the tricky relationship between disposition and ability, in the context of characterizing concept-possession as a disposition he commits himself to treating both as a ‘possibility’ (WV 360). In Aristotelian terms, concept-possession is a *power or potentiality* rather than an *actuality*. That much is accepted, willy-nilly, even by representationalists who profess to disagree with ‘pragmatism’ on this score (see Glock 2006: 51-3). Concept-possession must belong to the category of a potentiality. Unlike concept-exercise, concept-possession is *enduring* or static rather than episodic or occurrent. A subject can possess a concept at time $t$ without exercising the concept at $t$. On the other hand, concept-possession *manifests* itself in certain episodes, in the employment of concepts, notably in overt or silent classification or inference.

Concept-possession is not a straightforward kind of disposition or ability, however. It is not a disposition in the everyday sense of that term (Kenny 1989: 83-4; Baker/Hacker 2006: 373-5). In ordinary parlance, dispositions include character traits which are half-way between abilities and action, between a capacity and its actualization. They are neither realized automatically nor simply subject to the will. Furthermore, to have the disposition to be generous, for instance, it does not suffice to be capable of being generous; one must moreover have a tendency to do so in propitious circumstances.

At the same time, there is a *technical* sense of disposition in which dispositions are ‘one-way’ or ‘natural powers’, which are automatically exercised given certain antecedent conditions. By contrast, abilities are ‘two-way powers’ (see Kenny 1975: 52-3, 123-4). Their possessors can exercise them or refrain from exercising them at will. Greenhouse gases have the disposition or one-way power to trap light reflected from the surface, and will inevitably do so in normal circumstances. By contrast, I can choose whether or not to exercise my ability to cycle to work.
But now, neither linguistic understanding nor conceptual thought are uniformly subject to the will. I might decide not to employ certain concepts actively in a complex train of thought. And I can refrain from exercising my linguistic understanding actively, by performing or responding to certain utterances. But as Kenny points out, passive understanding is not under my control. ‘Looking up at the flashing lights of the advertisements in Piccadilly Circus, one cannot prevent oneself from understanding their message. (How much more beautiful they would be, G.K. Chesterton once remarked, if only one could not read!’ (1989: 22). Similarly, while we can decide whether or not to look, once we have decided to look, we cannot decide whether or not to see something within our field of vision. By the same token, conceptually gifted creatures cannot decide whether or not to conceptualize what they see, in the sense of recognizing it as being of a certain kind. At most, they can try to reconceptualize what they see by thinking of less obvious categories that also apply to it.

Does that mean that understanding and concept-possession are not abilities? It does, in so far as their exercise consists in understanding an utterance on a particular occasion or in spontaneous judgement. However, understanding and concept-possession are manifested not just through involuntary cognitive operations, but also through activities under the subject’s control. These are precisely the linguistic abilities Wittgenstein emphasizes, namely of explaining and employing a term, and of reacting to its use by others. The intermediate status of understanding and concept-possession is further confirmed by the fact that even its non-voluntary exercise has a normative dimension which is absent from the exercise of mere dispositions. The manifestation of a disposition like sugar’s solubility in water cannot be correct or mistaken. By contrast, I can make mistakes in my conceptual classifications, not just in getting it down-right wrong, but also in making classifications that are imprecise or irrelevant.
5. Concepts and abilities

Given that concept-possession is an ability (albeit of a special kind), it would seem natural to identify concepts with abilities. Thus Price states: ‘a concept is not an entity, … but a disposition or capacity’ (1953: 348). In the same vein, and under the influence of Wittgenstein, Geach pronounces that concepts ‘are capacities exercised in acts of judgement’ (1957: 7).

Geach points out that this identification of concepts and capacities does not fall foul of a constraint that concepts must be shareable (unlike Fodor’s proposal that concepts are mental particulars—see Glock 2009). It does not entail that ‘it is improper to speak of two people as “having the same concept”’, since different individuals can possess the same mental capacities (1957, 14). Furthermore, concepts and abilities alike can be acquired, applied and lost, and some of them may be innate. Finally, it is tempting simply to infer from the fact that to possess a concept is to possess an ability that concepts themselves are abilities. Unfortunately, such a move would be precipitate. For our linguistic constructions need not comply with the naïve compositionalist recipe having $x = \text{having } y \Rightarrow x = y$, since having may amount to something different in each case. That naïve compositionalism is false was pointed out by Wittgenstein: ‘It is 5 o’clock on the sun’ makes no sense even though ‘it is 5 o’clock’ and ‘on the sun’ do (PI §§350-1).

In fact, there are weighty objections against identifying concepts with dispositions, capacities or abilities. First, one thing we do with concepts is to define or explain them. But to define a concept is not to define or explain a capacity. Secondly, concepts can be instantiated or satisfied by things. But abilities cannot. Thirdly, and relatedly, concepts have an extension and an intension, which cannot be said of abilities. Insofar as the ability linked to possessing the concept $F$ has an extension, it is not the range of things that are $F$, but either the range of subjects that possess $F$, or the range of situations in which these possessors can apply or withhold $F$. Fourthly, a concept can occur in a proposition or statement, but an ability cannot.
Of course, abilities can occur in propositions in the sense of being mentioned in them. But concepts occur in propositions in yet another and more pervasive way. The concept of being sweet occurs in

(4) Sugar is sweet
even though there is no mention of an ability.

To some Wittgensteinians, this line of reasoning may smack of reification. For it seems committed to a building-block model according to which small abstract components—concepts—combine to form large abstract wholes—Fregean thoughts or propositions. But, the Wittgensteinians are wont to insist, this model is not a truism but a problematic Platonist metaphor. What seems to give content to that metaphor is exclusively the fact that the linguistic expression of thoughts—namely sentences—has components—namely words (see Kenny 1989 126-7). The Platonist picture transposes the part/whole relation from the spatial and temporal sphere—including that of the written or spoken word—to a sphere—that of abstract entities—to which ex hypothesis neither spatial nor temporal notions apply.

I am sympathetic to the idea that concepts are logical constructions from linguistic and cognitive abilities and activities. Still, there is a rationale for parsing propositions into concepts which does not rely on the building-block metaphor. Instead, it is fuelled by the holistic idea that concepts are abstractions from the inferential relations between propositions. We need to parse propositions into concepts, this story goes, in order to explain, e.g., the logical relation between the proposition that the cat is on an oak tree and the proposition that the cat is on a plant. Admittedly, according to inferentialism, talk about concepts as components of propositions is an abstraction from practices of reasoning. Nevertheless, this abstraction drives a real wedge between concepts and abilities. To put it at its most non-committal, concepts are involved in propositions in a way in which abilities are not. If the logical construction of concepts succeeds, it will mean that a range of abilities on the part of speakers is presupposed (probably in a rather complex and indirect fashion) by statements like
(4). Yet it will not mean that (4) maintains or implies that sugar has such abilities, even though it clearly maintains or implies that sugar possesses a certain property or satisfies a certain concept.

A final objection starts out from the very observation that seemed to lend succour to the identification of concepts with abilities. If having a concept is an ability, it would seem to be an ability to operate with concepts. In that case, however, the concept itself cannot be identical with the ability. Rather, it is something used in the exercise of that ability.

6. Concepts, techniques and rules

Concepts are not identical with abilities, even though to possess a concept is to possess an ability. But perhaps the idea that concepts are employed in the exercise of that ability points the way forward. At any rate, it is congenial to Wittgenstein’s thinking during the forties.\textsuperscript{2} Investigations §569 maintains that the concepts of language ‘are instruments’. This assimilates concepts to linguistic expressions (words and descriptions), which are also characterized as instruments (§§11, 291, 360). Other remarks distinguish concepts from words and thereby avoid the suggestion that they are a kind of material object. In lectures of 1946 Wittgenstein suggested that ‘a concept is a technique of using a word’ (LPP 50). Similarly, in a manuscript from 1941: a concept is ‘the technique of our use of an expression: as it were, the railway network that we have built for it’ (MS 163: 56v). To possess or employ an instrument or technique is to possess or employ an ability. Yet neither instruments nor techniques are themselves abilities; instead, they are something which is \textit{used} in exercising

\textsuperscript{2} I owe the reference to these passages to Schulte 2009.
the ability. There is a difference, for instance, between the ability to skin a rabbit and the various tools or techniques one might employ to this end.

Nevertheless Wittgenstein’s suggestive remarks go astray, since they tie concepts too closely to language. To be sure, most philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein accept that the possession of concepts requires linguistic capacities. Even if they are right, however, and it is a substantial if, concepts occur in thoughts that we do not enunciate. A venerable tradition reaching from Plato to contemporary believers in a language of thought would have it that in such cases we nonetheless use words, namely *in foro interno*. But this is misguided, for reasons Wittgenstein himself highlighted. Talking to oneself in the imagination is no more necessary or sufficient for thinking than the occurrence of mental images. And the idea of a deeply unconscious language of thought ignores that a linguistic symbol must be used according to rules that a subject can explicate or at least recognize (see Hacker 1987; Glock 1997).

Wittgenstein’s proposal can easily be given a Kantian twist, however, which ties concepts in the first instance to thought or understanding rather than language. Concepts are techniques not just for using words, but for mental acts or operations. The capacity for such mental operations may presuppose possession of language, yet it can be exercised by a subject that does not engage in either overt or silent speech at the time. But what kind of mental operation? This question is connected to that concerning the function of concepts. Wittgenstein’s answer has palpable Kantian affinities. The role of concepts and of concept-formation is to ‘channel’ experience and thereby to set the ‘limits of the empirical’ (RFM 237-8). Our concepts determine what empirical descriptions make sense, and they license transformations of empirical propositions, transformations that themselves are not responsible to experience. The basic idea can be summarized by saying that conceptual thought revolves around classification and inference. Accordingly, a concept is identical not with the capacity to classify or infer, but with the technique employed by someone who exercises the ability to
classify or infer. Next, the term ‘technique’ needs to be made more specific, in line with both Kant and Wittgenstein. In so far as conceptual thought involves a technique, it is a technique of operating according to a rule or principle. Concepts, the proposal now runs, are rules or principles of classification and/or inference.

Unfortunately, even this modified proposal is threatened by categorical mismatches. It does not seem to be the case that to define a concept is to define a principle or rule. Rather, the principle or rule features in the definition. But perhaps this is just a vagary of our current use of ‘definition’ without further conceptual import. There is no linguistic infelicity in maintaining that to explain a concept is to explain a principle or rule for operating with the concept. Furthermore, Wittgenstein’s strategy vis-à-vis meaning can be adapted to this case: a concept is what the explanation of a concept explains, and if to explain a concept is to explain a rule, then this suggests that concepts are rules (even though only adherence to a compositionalist principle would yield this as a definite conclusion).

This leaves a final problem. At least prima facie, like abilities principles or rules do not occur in all propositions, but only in those which explicitly mention or refer to them. There may be a solution to this problem, however. If Strawson (1959: Part II) and Künne (2005) are to be trusted, universals can enter a proposition not just in the direct sense that the sentence expressing the proposition contains words or phrases referring to the universal/concept, but also in the more indirect sense that the sentence contains words or phrases expressing them. Why not extend this courtesy to concepts and thence to principles or rules? One qualm would be that principles can be true or false, whereas concepts cannot. Prima facie, rules seem to escape this difficulty in so far as they are expressed by sentences in the imperative rather than the indicative mood. Note, however, that this exemption does not even hold true of all regulative rules, not to mention constitutive rules. Thus a rule like

\[(5) \quad x \text{ is entitled to } \Phi \text{ in condition } C\]

can be prefixed by ‘it is true that …’.
A more promising response might be to maintain that stipulated rules of classification or inference are not genuinely truth-apt, syntactical appearances notwithstanding.

But why should one accept that rules like (5) feature in a proposition like (4) at all, however indirectly? The answer, I submit, is: because both propositions and their components are abstractions from the practices and abilities of concept-exercising creatures. That answer is obviously Wittgensteinian in spirit. To substantiate it, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

7. Meaning and the Individuation of Concepts

So far I have omitted a rather obvious answer to the definition question. Why not simply identify concepts with meanings, or at least the meanings of general terms? One reason has just been mentioned, namely that conceptual thought is not tied to either overt or silent speech. Another reason is the need to distinguish between the meaning of a sentence on the one hand, and what is said by the use of a sentence—the proposition expressed by the sentence—on the other (Glock 2003: 153-4). Unlike the meaning of a sentence, for example, what is said (believed, etc.) can be true or false, implausible or exaggerated. Moreover, far from being identical with sentence-meanings, what is said on a particular occasion depends on sentence-meaning and context of utterance. By implication, we must also distinguish between concepts—the components of propositions—and word-meanings.

Wittgenstein nowhere explicitly identified concepts with the meanings of words. At the same time he closely associated concepts and word-meaning. Rightly so. For this does justice to a crucial point about the identity of concepts—and one which gives point to the concept of a concept. Just like word-meaning, concepts cut across words, and indeed across individual languages. Different words, whether from the same or different languages, can express the same concept; and it appears that this is simply tantamount to their having the
same meaning. ‘When language-games change, then the concepts change, and with the concepts the meanings of words’ (OC §65). This passage suggests that the criterion for the identity of concepts coincides with the criterion for the identity of the meaning of expressions that express concepts:

(Concept-Identity) Two general terms express the same concept iff they are synonymous.

Alas, the criteria for synonymy are as contested as those for the identity of concepts. What is uncontroversial is that while ‘creature with a kidney’ and ‘creature with a heart’ apply to the same things—have the same extension—they are different concepts. What is more, while ‘equilateral triangle’ and ‘equiangular triangle’ apply necessarily to the same things, they nonetheless have different meaning and hence express different concepts. In current lingo, concepts and meaning are not just ‘intensional’ but ‘hyperintensional’.

One way of capturing this is Frege’s (1979: 197) idea of ‘equipollence’.

(Equipollence) Two predicates F and G are synonymous iff they are ‘equipollent’ or cognitively equivalent: anyone who understands them both accepts that they can be substituted salva veritate, independently of contingent facts, in all declarative sentences (except for special cases, e.g. when F or G are mentioned rather than used).

Wittgenstein can be interpreted as countenancing (Equipollence). Unlike current orthodoxy, however, he would deny that it individuates concepts as finely as the thesis of their hyperintensionality has it. According to him, mathematical proofs effect a concept-formation. By accepting ‘All and only equilateral triangles are equiangular triangles’ as a geometrical theorem, we have modified the meaning of the terms ‘equilateral triangle’ and ‘equiangular triangle’ in such a way that a locution like ‘$x$ is an equilateral triangle but $x$ is not an equiangular triangle’ is not just false, but downright nonsensical. By the same token, one cannot fully understand the two terms without recognizing that they are necessarily co-extensional. According to (Equipollence), this would mean that ‘equilateral triangle’ and ‘equiangular triangle’ are synonymous and express the same concept.
The moot question is: by what standards does someone who fails to recognize that all equilateral triangles are equiangular evince linguistic misunderstanding of the term ‘equilateral triangle’? Wittgenstein’s own criteria for understanding, it seems, require only the ability to apply the term—notably by distinguishing equilateral triangles from other types—and the ability to explain it. They do not require knowledge of its conceptual connections with other geometrical terms.

Once more the idea of explanation points the way forward. The meaning of an expression is what the explanation of meaning explains. And the proper explanation of the meaning of ‘equilateral triangle’ differs from the proper explanation of the meaning of ‘equiangular triangle’. A correct and canonical explanation of ‘equilateral triangle’ is ‘closed figure with three straight sides of equal length’, but not ‘closed figure with three identical internal angles’.

Following this route brings Wittgenstein’s position closer to the criterion for synonymy and hence identity of concepts adopted by contemporary Fregeans. (Mode of Presentation\(_1\)) \(F\) and \(G\) express the same concepts iff they have not just the same extension but also the same ‘mode of presentation’.

Or, to put it differently,

(Mode of Presentation\(_2\)) \(F\) and \(G\) are the same concept if to think of something as \(F\) is to think of something as \(G\).

This comports with the idea that \textit{equilateral triangle} and \textit{equiangular triangle} are different concepts, since thinking of \(x\) as a figure with three sides of equal length is different from thinking of \(x\) as being a figure with three identical internal angles.

At the same, Wittgenstein’s stress on explanation helps to block unwanted subjective interferences that threaten the Fregean criterion. For it is unclear what it is to think of something as \(F\), or \(G\). And by pain of psychologism we must avoid any concession that whether to think of something as \(F\) is to think of something as \(G\) depends on contingent
mental associations. To illustrate the problem, consider the question of whether the concept of being half-empty is the same as the concept of being half-full. Künne insists that they are not the same, since the contrast between optimists and pessimists shows that to think of something as half-empty differs from thinking of it as half-full (2005: 265). But the difference between positive and negative connotations of a term is merely one of colouring. For surely positivists and pessimists attach the same sense to phrases like ‘in the new year’, contrasting associations notwithstanding. The Wittgensteinian criterion of canonical explanation is more pertinent. But it does not yield an unequivocal verdict in our case. On the one hand one might hold that both terms have a single canonical explanation

\[ X \text{ is half-full/-empty (of } Y) := 50\% \text{ of } X\text{’s volume is taken up (by } Y). \]

On the other hand, one might insist that two canonical explanations are in play:

\[ X \text{ is half-full (of } Y) := 50\% \text{ of } X\text{’s volume is taken up (by } Y). \]

\[ X \text{ is half-empty (of } Y) := 50\% \text{ of } X\text{’s volume is not taken up (by } Y). \]

Neither the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century nor the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century has bequeathed to us a fully convincing account of concepts. But on the individuation question, their reflections complement each other.³

**Bibliography**


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