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Glock, Hans Johann

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## CONCEPTS, ABILITIES AND PROPOSITIONS

Hans-Johann GLOCK  
Zurich University

### *Summary*

This article investigates whether the concept of a concept can be given a fairly uniform explanation through a ‘cognitivist’ account, one that accepts that concepts exist independently of individual subjects, yet nonetheless invokes mental achievements and capacities. I consider various variants of such an account, which identify a concept, respectively, with a certain kind of ability, rule and way of thinking. All of them are confronted with what I call the ‘proposition problem’, namely that unlike these *explananda* concepts are standardly regarded as components of propositions. The paper ends by suggesting that this problem can be resolved by recognizing the different ways in which concepts can be involved in judgements or propositions, and by undermining the building-block model of concepts as abstract parts of abstract wholes.

### *1. The Project*

My aim is to elucidate the ordinary use or uses of the term ‘concept’, and those of its equivalents and cognates. This ordinary use includes everyday uses. As Ryle pointed out, however, the ordinary use which is important to philosophy also includes the *established* uses of terms in specialized forms of discourse, including technical uses (1971, 301–4). In the case of ‘concept’, these special disciplines include the history of ideas, psychology, logic and philosophy.

These days many philosophers vehemently reject an interest in ordinary language. Unfortunately, few of them provide arguments of any kind. A laudable exception to this rule is Christopher Peacocke. He rejects an investigation of the ordinary use of ‘concept’ on the grounds that it is ‘something of a term of art’ which lacks ‘a unique sense that is theoretically important’. His evidence is a Woody Allen movie in which a character from the entertainment industry says: ‘Right now, it’s only a notion, but I think I can get money to make it into a concept, and later turn it into an idea’ (Peacocke, 1992, 1–2). In my view, by contrast, the quote is funny precisely because it presupposes a distinction between concept, no-

tion and idea that we do not recognize in everyday speech, and which we suspect to be obscure even to the speaker himself. What we should concede is that the everyday use of ‘concept’ involves different strands, and this is even more obvious for its use in specialized disciplines. Furthermore, some of these uses may not just be distinct but downright incompatible. That would be all the more reason, however, to disentangle these different strands. Furthermore, it is rare even for technical uses of ‘concept’ to be purely stipulative. For these uses are part of philosophical or psychological theories that purport to explain cognitive and semantic phenomena that can be commonly described with the help of the concept of a concept (concerning, e.g., cognitive development or synonymy). This makes it imperative to chart the similarities and differences between novel and established senses of the term, since we need to clarify whether the novel theories even address the phenomena they aspire to explain.<sup>1</sup>

Like some related terms with a philosophical provenance—notably ‘idea’—but unlike others—notably ‘universal’—‘concept’ *is* widely employed in everyday parlance. In many everyday contexts, moreover, ‘concept’ means roughly: *general term with a meaning*. This definition also fits the role of ‘concept’ in logic in so far as concepts have an extension and are components of sentences (see below). Yet it does *not* capture crucial uses in philosophy and psychology, where concepts are supposed to cut across *different natural languages*. In these contexts, ‘concept’ is more closely aligned with ‘idea’ than with ‘word’ or ‘term’. To be sure, a venerable tradition reaching from Occam to Fodor would allow us to extend the definition to these uses, since it postulates a mental language that is shared by all creatures capable of conceptual thought. Elsewhere I have argued, however, that the idea of a universal language of thought is incoherent and that in their semantic capacity concepts are not themselves linguistic symbols, but things represented or signified by such symbols (Glock, 2006, 45–8; 2009, 23–9). I shall not repeat this criticism here; instead I simply set aside concepts qua general terms for current purposes. At the same time, in pursuing the idea of concepts that transcend lan-

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1. But I shall ignore here to what extent the authors to which I attribute certain definitions need to pay heed to ordinary use for their own theoretical purposes. Accordingly, pointing out that such a definition fails to capture ordinary use simply serves to advance my search for a definition that does, and is not necessarily meant as a criticism of the author to whom the unsuccessful definition is attributed.

guages, I shall concentrate on concepts *expressed* by general terms, which are sometimes called ‘predicative concepts’.

It is relatively uncontroversial that such concepts are involved when rational creatures entertain thoughts like

- (1) Dogs bark.

The nature of this involvement remains controversial, however. In the history of philosophy, one can distinguish three fundamental approaches to concepts. According to *subjectivist* conceptions, concepts are mental phenomena, particular entities or goings-on in the mind or in the head of individuals. According to *objectivist* conceptions, concepts exist independently of human minds, as self-subsistent abstract entities. Finally, there is an intermediate position, which may be termed *cognitivist*.<sup>2</sup> It agrees with objectivism in denying that concepts are mental particulars, while at the same time maintaining, with subjectivism, that they have an ineliminable mental or cognitive dimension. One version of cognitivism is intersubjectivism. It holds that concepts exist independently of individual rational subjects, but insists that they are constituted by intersubjective linguistic practices. Another version brackets the question of existence, yet holds that what concepts are—their essence, if you wish—can be explained only by reference to the operations and capacities of rational subjects. It is this less committal idea that I seek to explore in this article. In sections 2 – 4 I discuss and ultimately reject the popular cognitivist proposal that concepts are simply identical with a certain kind of ability. Sections 5 – 6 consider three other cognitivist proposals, namely that concepts are identical, respectively, with tools, techniques or rules, or ways of thinking. Section 7 turns to a challenge confronting all four cognitivist proposals, which I call the proposition problem: unlike abilities, tools, techniques or rules and ways of thinking, concepts appear to be constituents of propositions. In section 8 I argue that the ultimate solution to this problem is to treat both propositions and concepts as logical constructions from conceptual abilities. I end by indicating how concepts could be ways of thinking and yet

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2. In previous publications I have used the label ‘pragmatism’, reluctantly following the lead of Fodor. But ‘cognitivism’ avoids inapposite connotations. It is also superior to talk of ‘epistemic conceptions’, since not all conceptual judgement amounts to knowledge.

occur in propositions, and thereby suggest how seemingly incompatible features of the ordinary use of ‘concept’ might be reconciled.

## 2. *Concepts and abilities*

The most popular and perhaps the most natural version of cognitivism identifies concepts with abilities (See also [Kenny, this volume](#)). Thus, in response to the question ‘Are concepts entities or are they dispositions?’ Price states in no uncertain terms: ‘a concept is not an entity (...) but a disposition or capacity’ (1953, 320, 348). In the same vein Geach pronounces that concepts ‘are capacities exercised in acts of judgement’ (1957, 7, see also 13). This proposal respects several features of established use.

First, *properties* are objective, something possessed by things of all kinds. By contrast, *concepts* are something possessed by rational subjects capable of classifying things according to their properties. This is simply a crucial aspect of the cognitive dimension of concepts stressed by cognitivism.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the identification of concepts and capacities does not fall foul of the constraint that concepts must be shareable.<sup>4</sup> As Geach points out, 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). Thirdly, concepts and abilities alike can be acquired, applied and lost, and some of them may be innate.

Finally, to possess a concept is to possess a certain kind of mental ability, capacity or disposition. In what follows, I refrain from deciding which of these types of potentiality is the most appropriate general category (see [Glock 2010b](#), sct. 5). Barring that issue, identifying concept-possession with an ability, capacity or disposition of some kind is inevitable.<sup>5</sup> Concepts are involved not just in occurrent thoughts or beliefs, but also in

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3. The identification of concepts with properties is one of the most popular versions of objectivism. For a more elaborate critique of it see [Glock 2010b](#).

4. By contrast to those versions of subjectivism which treat concepts as mental particulars. See [Glock 2009](#).

5. That concept-possession is an ability of some kind is accepted, willy-nilly, even by Fodor, who purports to contradict cognitivism (a.k.a. ‘pragmatism’) on this issue (2003, p. 19). The real bone of contention between representationalists like Fodor and those cognitivists that can properly be called ‘concept pragmatists’ in a wide sense—e.g. Wittgenstein, Ryle, Travis and Brandom—concerns the question of whether concept-possession is

also in long-standing or dispositional beliefs. Consequently, the possession of concepts must be at least as stable as the possession of dispositional beliefs. Put in Aristotelian terms, concept-possession must be a potentiality of some kind, since it combines two features. On the one hand, it is enduring rather than episodic. On the other hand, it is something which manifests itself in certain episodes, notably of overt or silent classification or inference.

### 3. *The Individuation of Concepts and Abilities*

Its *prima facie* plausibility notwithstanding, the identification of concepts with abilities faces an objection concerning principles of individuation. Thus subjectivists like Fodor have alleged that concepts are more finely individuated than abilities. For instance, ‘creature with a kidney’ and ‘creature with a heart’ apply to all and only the same things, but they express different concepts. Furthermore, ‘equilateral triangle’ and ‘equiangular triangle’ apply necessarily to the same things, yet they still express different concepts. In current jargon, concepts are not just ‘intensional’ but ‘hyperintensional’.

Now, an ability is individuated by reference to its exercise. But, Fodor maintains, the same sorting and inferential performances can manifest the possession of different concepts. Confining ourselves to the ability to sort or discriminate, sorting equilateral triangles from all other figures is also sorting equiangular triangles from all other figures (2003, 25–6, 143–6). It seems to follow that concepts cannot be individuated by the exercise of an ability, and hence that they cannot be individuated by reference to abilities. In effect, Fodor’s objection runs as follows:

- P<sub>1</sub>: Abilities are individuated by their exercise (ability to  $\Phi$  = ability to  $\Psi$  iff  $\Phi$ ing =  $\Psi$ ing).
- P<sub>2</sub>: In all possible situations, one and the same sorting activity can manifest different concepts.

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simply the ability to represent the property of being  $F$  or  $F$ s as  $F$ s, or whether it should be explained as the ability to classify things into those which are  $F$ s and those which aren’t, or to draw inferences from thoughts about  $F$ s.

- C: Concepts cannot be individuated through the abilities which constitute their possession.

The argument is valid. Yet  $P_2$  is false: sorting triangles according to lengths is not the same activity as sorting triangles according to angles, even though the results are the same. The difference in the two activities can be displayed by linguistic creatures, who can justify their sorting along different lines. It can even be manifested in non-linguistic behaviour. A creature that sorts on account of measuring lengths applies *equilateral triangle*, a creature that sorts on account of measuring angles applies *equiangular triangle*. These are different activities, manifesting different abilities and thereby the possession of different concepts. And it is obvious that one can have one of these abilities or concepts without having the other. Indeed, most children actually learn how to measure lengths before learning how to measure angles.

But individuation also poses another challenge to identifying concepts with abilities. Many cognitivists grant that there is no precise way of individuating abilities. Thus Travis (2000) grants that linking concepts to abilities may not be much help in individuating concepts, since it is not clear how abilities are to be counted. That concession needs to be put in perspective, however. Like Travis, Geach (1957, 15) accepts that it is absurd to ask how many abilities are exercised in a judgement. Yet he also insists, rightly, that we can still distinguish between such abilities. More generally, one must distinguish between the possibility of enumerating and the possibility individuating entities of a particular kind (see Strawson 1997, ch. 1; Glock 2003, 47–52). And this general lesson applies equally to abilities.

Still a problem remains. It is *prima facie* plausible to hold that we are able not only to distinguish the concept of a dog from that of barking, but also to specify that precisely two concepts are involved in judging that (1). So concepts and abilities seem to come apart on the issue of enumerability. This verdict can be contested, however, on the grounds that it does not compare like with like. The claim that the number of concepts involved in (1) is determinate is only even remotely plausible if we confine ourselves to *predicative* concepts (otherwise we have to add at least one quantitative concept that corresponds to the plural in English; alternatively, if we analyse (1) with the help of Fregean logic, we need to add the logical concepts of universal quantification and of material implication).

But the very same consideration applies to abilities. It is *just as* plausible to insist that precisely two *predicative abilities* are involved in judging that (1)—namely that of thinking about dogs and that of thinking about things that bark—as it is to maintain that precisely two predicative concepts are involved in (1). Accordingly, individuation is no obstacle to the idea that concepts are a kind of ability.

#### 4. *Differences between Concepts and Abilities*

Other weighty objections remain, however. The established use of ‘concept’ differs from that of ‘ability’ in several respects.

First, one thing we do with concepts is to define or explain them. But to define or explain a concept is not to define or explain a capacity. Normally, to explain an ability is to explain its causal preconditions (causal explanation), whereas to explain a concept is to explain its content (semantic explanation). Furthermore, even when we define an ability (i.e. explain its content), we specify what it is an ability to do (this is the reason why abilities are individuated through their exercise, as mentioned in *sect. 3*). By contrast, to explain a concept is to specify the conditions that an object must satisfy to fall under it.

Secondly, and relatedly, concepts can be instantiated or satisfied by things; conversely, things instantiate, satisfy or fall under concepts. These things cannot be said of abilities, or at least not in the same sense.

Thirdly, and once more relatedly, concepts have an extension (the set of objects which fall under them) and an intension (the features which qualify objects for falling under them); yet this 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, as in

- (2) The ability to lie convincingly is a great asset in business.



But it seems that concepts occur in propositions in yet another and more pervasive way, not just as topics or referents, something the proposition is about, but as components. The concept of being sweet occurs in the proposition that

(3) Sugar is sweet

even though no ability occurs in it.

### 5. *Tools, Techniques and Rules*

At this point it behoves us to return to the issue of concept possession, since it provides the strongest argument in favour of the identification

(I) To possess a concept = to possess an ability.

But one cannot simply apply the general principle

(II) having  $x =$  having  $y \Rightarrow x = y$

to this case. For it remains an open question whether (I) cannot be glossed as:

(I')  $S$  has the concept  $F \Leftrightarrow S$  has the ability of operating with  $F$ .

Of course, someone who identifies concepts with abilities will resist that paraphrase and insist that the ability with which possessing the concept  $F$  is to be identified must be explained without mention of the concept  $F$ , an entity with which the subject operates. But it is an option that she has not ruled out. We need to consider the following alternative to identifying concepts with abilities. If having a concept is an ability, it is an ability to operate with concepts. In that case, however, the *concept itself* cannot be identical with the ability. Rather, it is *something employed* in the exercise of that ability.

A cognitivist conception which picks up this cue is the popular idea that concepts are a kind of cognitive or linguistic *tool*. Concepts are things employed in the exercise of conceptual abilities, just as tools are things employed in the exercise of manual (technical) abilities.

Unfortunately, it is far from clear what kind of tool concepts might be. Worse still, the analogy is misleading to begin with. The idea that concepts are akin to tools in that they are objects (concrete, mental or abstract) with which we operate in conceptual thought amounts to a reification. There is a difference between the possession of a tool and the possession of the ability to employ the tool—as I keep discovering to my cost when trying to operate with our electric drill. This distinction cannot be drawn in the case of concepts. To possess a concept is *ipso facto* to possess the ability to *use* the concept.

A third cognitivist account promises to heed that point. It maintains that a concept is not an object, properly speaking, but a *technique*. Thus Wittgenstein maintained that ‘a concept is a technique of using a word’, or ‘the technique of our use of an expression: as it were, the railway network that we have built for it’ (1988: 50 and 2000: MS 163: 56v).<sup>6</sup> To master or possess a technique is to master or possess an ability. Yet techniques are not themselves abilities, but something which the possessor of an ability uses in exercising the ability. There is a difference, for instance, between the ability to skin a rabbit and the various techniques one might employ to this end.

Wittgenstein regarded concepts as *linguistic* techniques. But his idea can be given a Kantian twist, in order to avoid the potentially problematic implication that concepts are the prerogative of linguistic creatures. One can tie concepts in the first instance to thought or understanding rather than language. Concepts are techniques not just for using words, but for mental operations or mental acts which may or may not be expressed in language. 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? A plausible answer is that conceptual thought revolves around classification and inference. Accordingly, the proposal currently under consideration is this: a concept is not identical with the capacity to classify or infer, but only 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

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6. For Wittgenstein’s approach to concepts see Glock 2010c; concerning the question whether concept-possession requires linguistic capacities see Glock 2010a.

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.

Even this modified proposal is threatened by category mismatches. It does not seem that to define a concept is to define a principle or rule. Rather, the principle or rule features in the definition. On the other hand, perhaps this is just a vagary of the current use of ‘definition’ in English, without further conceptual import. There is no linguistic infelicity in maintaining that to explain a concept is to explain a principle or rule for performing certain mental or linguistic operations.

Another qualm would be that principles can be true or false, whereas concepts cannot. *Prima facie*, at least, rules escape this difficulty, in so far as they are expressed by sentences in the imperative rather than indicative mood. Note, however, that this exemption does not even hold for all regulative rules, not to mention constitutive rules. Thus a regulative rule of the form

- (4)  $x$  ought to  $\Phi$  in condition  $C$

can be prefixed by ‘it is true that ...’ (See Glock 2005).

Furthermore, the question arises what form these principles or rules should take. Here we seem to be facing a dilemma. One option is that these rules are standards for the employment of concepts. They might, for instance, take the form of the rules Bennett extracts from Kant (Bennett, 1966, 145):

- (5) You may apply concept  $F$  to  $x$  iff  $x$  is ...

In that case the concept  $F$  itself is not identical with the rule. It is rather a kind of mental predicate the use of which is governed by the rule.

A second option is that the rule specifies another activity, e.g.

- (6) You may treat  $x$  in way  $W$  iff  $x$  is ... .

In that case the danger is that we are stuck with two unpalatable options. One is that  $W$  is a place-holder for practical activities which may presuppose concept-possession, but which someone who has mastered the concept need not engage in; the other is that  $W$  is a place-holder for concep-

tualization or classification, which would render the account unexplanatory.

## 6. *Ways of Thinking*

Ultimately, any cognitivist account of concepts must show that this dilemma is apparent rather than real. Or so I shall argue in the next section. First, however, I briefly want to consider a version of cognitivism that *prima facie* avoids this challenge. It is the Neo-Fregean proposal—epitomized by Peacocke and Kühne—that concepts are senses or ‘modes of presentation’. Unfortunately, the latter is no more than a catch-phrase, and one Frege himself never elaborated, least of all with respect to concepts, which he regarded as referents rather than senses of predicates. But we can put some flesh on it by treating concepts as *ways of thinking about objects*, though not in the adverbial sense of thinking about them hard or longingly. More specifically, concepts are ways of thinking about or conceiving of objects *as possessing certain properties*, without themselves being properties. To render that suggestion viable, we need to avoid literal interpretations of the Fregean idea that a sense is a mode of presenting a referent. Strictly speaking, there can be no way of presenting a referent unless *there is* a referent or extension. In the case of concepts, this would rule out uninstantiated concepts, which is absurd. On my construal, therefore, ways of thinking about objects are directed not just at those objects which possess the relevant properties, but at all objects of which the relevant properties can be predicated *either truly or falsely*. To put it differently, a concept is a way of thinking of objects from a suitable range as possessing or lacking certain properties. This reintroduces the idea of classification. Finally, we can operationalize the idea of ways of thinking, thereby further spelling out its cognitive dimension. The concept expressed by a predicate is determined by the features to which the subject refers in deciding whether a given objects falls under the concept, or would decide, if the question arose.<sup>7</sup>

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7. For a more elaborate discussion of Neo-Fregeanism see Glock 2011.

## 7. *The Proposition Problem*

Unsurprisingly, given their intellectual roots, the Neo-Fregeans emphasize the role of concepts in logic, or, more generally, in inferences, whether these be formally or materially valid. Concepts are, among other things, components of propositions. Nonetheless they have the same difficulty here as other cognitivist positions. At least *prima facie*, like abilities, principles or rules but unlike concepts, ways of thinking do *not* occur in all propositions, but only in those which are about them, i.e. explicitly mention or refer to them.

How can concepts be both ways of thinking and components of propositions? There are two ways of responding to this challenge, which are associated, respectively, with the figureheads of Strawson and Wittgenstein. I shall argue that in combination, these responses promise to resolve the ‘proposition problem’, which would otherwise seem intractable.

If Strawson is to be trusted, universals like properties can enter a proposition not just in the direct sense that the sentence expressing the proposition contains words or phrases referring to the property of being *F*, but also in the less direct sense that the sentence contains words or phrases signifying them (See Strawson 1959, Part II). By a similar token, that sentence contains general terms expressing the concept *F*, even though it does not refer to them. Finally one can extend this courtesy to any otherwise plausible *explanans* of ‘concept’. Sticking to the Neo-Fregean proposal, this would mean that the predicate in (3) expresses a way of thinking about, or of, substances, namely as possessing the property of being sweet.

Crucial to this construal is that standard propositions, and by implication our common or garden thinking, are *not about* concepts. That insight seems to go back at least as far as Aquinas, on Kenny’s interpretation in any case. Ideas (*species*) are ‘not what is thought of (*id quod intelligitur*) but that by which thinking takes place (*id quo intelligitur*)’ (Kenny, 1980, 71). It is also accepted by Price, who identifies concepts with capacities: ‘The concept is not *before* the mind as an object of inspection. It is at work *in* the mind, but not as one inspectable content among others ... It shows itself not as a detectable item of mental furniture, but rather as a guiding force, determining the direction which the series of presented particulars [mental images or words] takes ...’ (1953, 342). And it is congen-

ial to the Neo-Fregeanism propounded by Künne. In the spirit of Strawson, Künne distinguishes between application, signification and expression: the general term ‘dog’ applies to all and only dogs, connotes the property of being a dog, and expresses the concept of being a dog (2005, 254 and fn. 31, 263; see also his 2003, 4).

Some such distinction is prerequisite for capturing the different semantic properties or dimensions of general terms. Nonetheless the Strawson–Künne solution to the proposition problem immediately faces two challenges.

First, can’t the courtesy of being allowed to enter into a proposition indirectly be extended from ways of thinking to all otherwise plausible candidates for being concepts, notably abilities or rules? Secondly, why should one accept that *any* of these candidates feature in all propositions, however indirectly?

The answer to the first question is straightforward in so far as we stick to the relationship between concepts and general terms. It is perfectly commonplace to speak of words as expressing concepts. And there is no violent infelicity in speaking of general terms as expressing ways of thinking. The same goes for rules of classification and/or inference. Perhaps one of these notions—‘ways of thinking’ or ‘rule’—comes closer to capturing the ordinary meaning of ‘concept’, yet it is not on account of the possibility of being expressed by general terms. By contrast, it is at best misleading to speak of general terms as expressing an ability. Conceptual abilities are possessed by cognitive subjects, and they are expressed—in the sense of being manifested—by the mental activities—notably the judgements and inferences—of such subjects. And we might say that those activities manifest concepts indirectly, keeping this relation apart from the expression of concepts by general terms. The notion of a conceptual ability points to the *subject* of conceptual thought and to the *activity* (in a suitably loose sense of the term) of conceptual thinking. By contrast, it is out of place when it comes to the *content* of conceptual thought, which is precisely what the idea of concepts as components of propositions points to. What we still need is a way of reconciling the mental or cognitive dimension of concepts with the objective dimension suggested by their occurrence in propositions.

8. *Propositions and Concepts as Logical Constructions*

This takes us straight to the second challenge. The Strawson–Künne response at best removes an obstacle to claiming that concepts can be ways of thinking and yet appear in propositions. But what positive reasons do we have for accepting that ways of thinking appear in propositions, let alone as components of propositions? The answer, I submit, is that both propositions and their components are logical constructions out of the practices and abilities of concept-exercising creatures.

In this article I can only go some way towards justifying that answer. A first step consists in scrutinizing the idiom of concepts as ‘components’ of propositions in a Wittgensteinian spirit. Perhaps that idiom is misleading and we need to unearth its underlying function.

What is the rationale for speaking about concepts and propositions and for parsing propositions into concepts? These notions are helpful in accounting for facts like the following: first, different people can think the same thing—that is, share the same thoughts; secondly, they can entertain thoughts which, though different, stand in logical relations to each other; thirdly, they can do both of these things *without* sharing a language. When a monoglot Anglophone *A* and a monoglot Germanophone *B* both believe that

(7) Cats are animals

then they share a thought. Similarly, if *A* believes that

(8) Cats are mammals

and *B* believes that

(9) Cats are vertebrates

then what *B* believes follows from what *A* believes. These facts are easily explained in terms of propositions and concepts. *A* and *B* can both believe that (7) because they have both mastered the concepts that occur in (7), irrespective of the fact that they express them through different words (e.g. ‘animal’ vs. ‘Tier’). What *A* believes entails what *B* believes because of the relations that obtain between the concepts that occur in (8) and (9). All of which is in no way undermined by the fact that *A* and *B* would ex-

press these propositions and concepts through different words (e.g. ‘animal’ vs. ‘Tier’).

Now, the most straightforward explanation of these features appears to be ‘the building-block model’ of propositions and concepts.<sup>8</sup> According to this model what a subject believes (the content of *A*’s belief) is a proposition or thought, a complex (abstract) object of which concepts are the components; thus the thought that dogs bark is a *complex abstract object* of which the concepts DOG and BARK are *abstract parts*. By a similar token, what a subject has (*A*’s state of believing) is a mental *process of accepting* the whole proposition, and thinking one of the component concepts is a *stage* in this process; thus to believe that dogs bark, *A* must first think DOG and then BARK. In summary, if *A* believes that *p*, then she stands in a relation of grasping and accepting an abstract entity, a proposition, of which concepts are (equally abstract) components. It follows that one cannot grasp or accept the whole proposition without having or grasping its constituent concepts.

Its popularity notwithstanding, however, the building-block model is problematic. There are both empirical and conceptual qualms about the idea that entertaining the part of a thought correlates with a definite stage of a more protracted mental or neuro-physiological process—the entertaining of the whole thought. Even if these could be waved, we would only be dealing with stages of *thinking* a thought, not with stages of *thoughts*. As regards the latter, the building-block model transposes the part/whole relation from the spatial and temporal sphere to a sphere—that of abstract entities—to which, ex hypothesis, neither spatial nor temporal notions apply. What seems to give sense to talk of parts and wholes in the case of propositions or thoughts is the fact that the linguistic expressions of thoughts—namely sentences—have components—namely words (see Kenny 1989, 126–7). What is said or thought has genuine components to the extent to which its linguistic expression has components (which may, for instance, be explained when *A* is called upon to state and explain what she believes).

Following Quine, many philosophers regard propositions as dubious entities. They are not just abstract objects, but intensional, and hence, allegedly, lack criteria of identity. Such philosophers often replace proposi-

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8. As far as I can tell, the dismissal phrase ‘building-block theory’ goes back to Davidson. See his 1984, 4, 220.



tions by sentences as the objects of propositional arguments. I am more inclined to challenge an assumption which the orthodox view shares with its nominalist-cum-extensionalist critics, namely that intentional verbs signify relations to either abstract or concrete objects. The idea of propositional attitudes is problematic not just on account of ‘propositional’ but also on account of ‘attitudes’. For the idea that belief is a relation between a subject and an entity amounts to a reification.

Admittedly, noun-clauses like ‘that the cat went up the oak tree’ or ‘what Carl believes’ are grammatically speaking the objects of beliefs. But they are *intentional* rather than *object-accusatives* (White 1972).

(10) Clare Short believes Tony Blair

entails that there is an object  $x$  such that Short believes  $x$ . In (10) the psychological verb expresses a genuine relation, since here two relata must exist, one to believe, and one to be believed. By contrast,

(11) Short believes that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction.

does not entail that there is an object  $x$  such that Short believes  $x$ . Nothing in reality need correspond to the noun-phrase of (11), since the relevant state of affairs need not exist or obtain.

A defender of the building-block model might dig his heels in and insist that something must exist, namely a propositional content which is a real object, though an abstract one. But this ‘something’ is a grammatical projection from that-clauses rather than a genuine object.<sup>9</sup> Brentano was right to insist that to believe is to believe something. (11) entails that there is something Short believes. Yet in the first instance this simply means that Short cannot believe anything unless there is an intelligible answer to the question ‘What does Short believe?’ Furthermore, the wh-clause ‘what Short believes’, like ‘what Short weighs’, incorporates an interrogative rather than a relative pronoun. Thus ‘Prescott knows the person Short believes’ and ‘The person Short believes is Blair’ together entail ‘Prescott knows Blair’. Yet ‘Prescott knows what Claire Short believes’ and ‘What Short believes is that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction’ do not

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9. Pace Quine, the term ‘something’ is wider than ‘object’. ‘Something’ is syntactically transcategorial: it can quantify into the positions of singular term, predicate, and sentence. Only in the first case is it equivalent to ‘object’. For the complex relations between these expressions, as well as ‘exists’, ‘there is’ and ‘real’, see Glock 2003, 52-63.

entail ‘Prescott knows that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction’, if only because one cannot know a falsehood. Similarly, ‘Prescott knows what Short weighs’ and ‘Short weighs 70 kg’ do not entail ‘Prescott knows 70kg’, since that sentence is ungrammatical. Neither ‘what Short weighs’ nor ‘what Short believes’ signify an object to which Short is related. By the same token, believing that  $p$  is no more a *genuine relation* to an object than weighing  $n$  kilograms.

It might be objected that there are pertinent contexts in which ‘what Short believes’ incorporates a relative pronoun. In conjunction with (11)

(12) Prescott believes what Short believes

entails

(13) Prescott believes that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction.

But (12) is not underwritten by our knowledge that Short and Prescott are related in the same way to an entity beyond space and time, whatever that might mean. It is underwritten by the fact that both share certain properties regarding a particular question, namely the question of whether Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction. Even in this context, ‘what Short believes’ is an interrogative clause in a less direct sense, since its sense derives from the way in which Short would or could respond to a certain question, or react in certain situations, e.g. when it comes to approving the attack on Iraq in Parliament.

That different people  $A$  and  $B$  can think the same thought or hold the same belief does not mean that there is an abstract object to which they severally stand in the relation of thinking, believing, saying, etc. It just means that both  $A$  and  $B$  believe that snow is white; that is to say, what they both believe can be expressed by the same declarative sentence. If  $A$  and  $B$  are to disagree, what  $A$  says or asserts must be what  $B$  denies. But this does not commit one to the existence of self-subsistent entities beyond space and time, but only to the conceptual truism that if  $B$  denies what  $A$  asserts, and  $A$  asserts that  $p$ , then  $B$  denies that  $p$ .

The building-block model also goes astray in assuming that the alleged objects to which subjects of belief are related are propositions. Many intentional verbs cannot be characterised as expressing a relation either to a proposition or to a sentence. It makes no sense to expect, fear or hope a sentence or proposition, at least not in the same sense as to expect, fear or

hope that  $p$ . And given that what I can suspect is what you can believe, this difficulty may be contagious. That is to say, it may show that even though it makes sense to believe the proposition that  $p$ , believing that  $p$  is not the same as believing the proposition that  $p$ .

One might respond that in its philosophical usage, ‘proposition’ is a term of art which is exempted from the vagaries of certain intentional verbs in English that rule out locutions like

(14)  $A$  fears/expects/hopes the proposition that  $p$ .

But this invites the challenge to explain what precisely that technical term means. And because of the illicitness of (14) that challenge cannot be met by stipulating that propositions are simply what we believe, expect, hope, etc.

The denial that what we believe is *always* a proposition seems to imply, however, that in cases in which we *do* believe the proposition that  $p$ , we have two beliefs, the belief that  $p$  and the belief in the proposition that  $p$ . But this objection can be fended off as follows. To say that  $A$  believes the proposition that  $p$  is not to ascribe to her a belief in addition to her belief that  $p$ . Rather, it is to place her belief that  $p$  in a certain context. Believing that  $p$  is simply a matter of *believing something to be so*, whereas believing the proposition that  $p$  is a matter of *believing something to be true*. In the case of simply believing, the focus is on how things are or might be, in the case of believing a proposition, on how they have or might be stated or believed to be (see Rundle 2001).

## 9. Conclusion

The measurement analogy does not just pinpoint a weakness in the building-block model of belief, it also promises to furnish the basis for a cognitivist alternative. (On the measurement analogy see Beckermann 1996.) When we ascribe a weight to a person, we do not ascribe to them a genuine relation to an abstract object. Rather, we ascribe to the person a relation to other material objects, for instance that of being in balance with a cube which contains 60 litres of water. *Mutatis mutandis* for the case of belief. In ascribing a belief to a person, we ultimately describe and explain their actual or possible behaviour. We place the subject not in a relation to

a genuine object, but in the context of a system of describing and explaining the subject's behaviour and behavioural capacities. In the final analysis, talk about propositions and concepts is to be elucidated in terms of what subjects think or say, or, more accurately still, *could* think or say.

Although propositions are not themselves linguistic entities, they are akin to what Prior called logical constructions from linguistic phenomena, namely from the that-clauses by which we report and refer to what people say or think (Prior 1971, ch. 2). The criteria of identity for propositions make essential references to linguistic acts (sayings or utterances). There are propositions no one has ever uttered or thought of. But what distinguishes two such propositions is evident from the declarative sentences which express them. Although our criteria of identity for propositions are not the same as our criteria of identity for sentences, we can only identify the former because we can identify the latter. Although there are different linguistic expressions for the most important truth discovered by Newton and the most important truth discovered by Einstein, what distinguishes these two truths is evident from their expressions—'F = ma' and 'E = mc<sup>2</sup>'.

At this juncture a satisfactory solution to the proposition problem requires a detailed logical construction of talk about both propositions *and* concepts out of talk about the abilities of rational subjects. Although I do not know of any entirely convincing execution of this programme, there are several noteworthy attempts;<sup>10</sup> and I myself have contributed to the project by blocking possible objections (1997; 2006, 53–7). Assuming the feasibility of the cognitivist explanation, let us return to the proposition problem from the perspective of the measurement analogy. In what sense can ways of thinking occur in propositions? The answer is, very roughly: in the sense that *S* can only think that *a* is *F* if *S* has the capacity to think about objects as being *F*. Propositions are what is or can be said or thought. Concepts are ways in which subjects do or could conceive of properties.

To talk of propositions and concepts is not just a *façon de parler*, on this view, and propositions and concepts are not just 'make-believe entities' (to use what is indeed a currently fashionable *façon de parler*). Rather, they are logical constructions in a non-reductive sense. It may prove

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10. In addition to the aforementioned measurement analogy and to Prior's own account, see, e.g., Sellars 1963; von Savigny 1983; Brandom 1998; Dolby 2007.

impossible to paraphrase concepts away. We may need to refer to them in order to describe the practices of creatures with highly evolved cognitive and/or linguistic abilities. At the same time, the existence and nature of concepts, as well as their individuation, becomes unmysterious once their role within that practice and its description is understood. It is only possible to state what propositions and concepts are in terms which implicitly refer to what people say or do; and we identify propositions and concepts by grouping or classifying actual or potential token-expressions according to what they say or mean. On this basis we may at least hope to reconcile two apparently incompatible features of the ordinary use of ‘concept’, the cognitive dimension and the appearance in propositions.<sup>11</sup>

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