

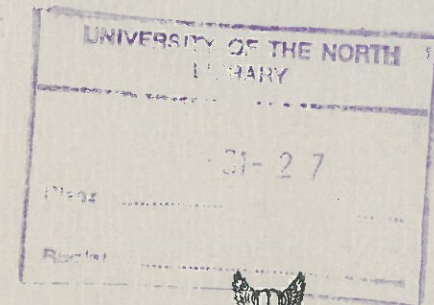
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# THE STATUS OF CONCEPTS

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# THE STATUS OF CONCEPTS

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## OPSOMMING

In verskeie teoretiese en alledaagse verbande word daar van begrippe gepraat. Dit is egter een ding om van begrippe te praat, maar totaal 'n ander om rekenskap te gee van wat by sodanige spreke betrokke is. Wat is 'n begrip? 'n Populêre opvatting is dat begrippe sekere unieke entiteite is. Voorbeelde hiervan is Plato se Ideeëleer en Locke se opvatting dat begrippe afbeeldings ('ideas') in die bewussynstroom is. Hierdie verdingliking van begrippe gee tot onoorkomelike logiese probleme, soos byvoorbeeld die ontstaan van oneindige regressies, aanleiding. Die standpunt wat teenoor hierdie tipe begripsteorie ingeneem word is dat spreke oor begrippe nie spreke oor entiteite is nie, maar spreke wat uiteindelik parasiteer op die beskrywings wat op mense se lewe van denke en handeling toegepas word. Begrippe geniet dus geen ontologiese status nie, maar slegs 'n logiese.

## THE STATUS OF CONCEPTS

In various theoretical and non-theoretical contexts we engage in talk about ideas, notions or concepts. For example, a teacher may lament that a pupil does not have the foggiest idea of geometry. A politician may claim that his party's recently formulated racial policy represents a totally new concept in human relationships. Business leaders are heard to talk about new concepts in marketing and advertising. Although some of these uses of the term 'concept' have a rather sophisticated ring, the man in the street will nevertheless, I think, readily grasp what is being conveyed. In theoretical contexts on the other hand, we find, for example, psychologists studying a phenomenon called 'concept formation' or 'concept attainment'. Anthropologists may contend that the conceptual scheme of Western man is radically different from that of the members of a certain primitive tribe. And to list a final example, we find philosophers saying such things as that the concept of responsibility entails the concept of freedom, or that the concept of space is not applicable to phenomena of consciousness.

These and affiliated uses of the term 'concept' and its cognates inevitably give rise to the question: What exactly is meant by a concept? What sort of a thing is a concept? Consider one possible source of embarrassment for those who try to make sense of our theoretical and non-theoretical talk about concepts. The statement 'Honesty is a virtue' is a statement about honesty, and similarly the statement 'A tree is a plant' is a statement about trees. In spite of their superficial similarity, these statements are logically miles apart. For example, a tree

is something which may be to the left, or to the right of a garden gate. Again, a tree may be young or old, but honesty cannot be either young or old. In other words, the spatial and temporal qualifications that are appropriate to physical objects like trees do not fit in the context of honesty at all. Conversely, there are things we can say about honesty that cannot sensibly be said about trees or other physical objects. For example, we may say that honesty stands in the logical relationship of entailment to virtue, i.e. that honesty implies virtue, but it is absurd to say that the tree implies the garden gate or vice versa. A tree may stand in certain spatial relationships to other objects surrounding it, but it cannot enter into any logical relationships such as entailment. In short, honesty is not a thing, but a concept.

But suppose now that someone, say Mrs. Robinson, remarks to a friend: 'You know, my charwoman is absolutely honest; she won't even touch money absent-mindedly left lying'. Mrs. Robinson makes this statement at some particular moment at some particular place (say at 10.00 on the 1st of June, 1973 in her sitting room), and in doing so she is then and there applying the concept of honesty to her charwoman. Of course, in applying it, she is thinking it. And now the following tricky question forces itself upon us: How is it possible for a non-temporal, non-spatial thing such as a concept to enter into the concrete thinkings of persons, occurring at a particular time at a particular place? To put it differently: How are we to square abstract talk about concepts and their logical interconnections with concrete talk about the live thinkings that persons engage in on specific occasions?

We saw that a concept is not a physical, spatio-temporal entity. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility of contending, in the spirit of a Plato or an early Husserl, that concepts are non-*physical* entities. Plato argues that besides the ordinary, physical world there is another Capital Letter World, i.e. the non-spatial, timeless Realm of Ideas or Concepts. He construes the momentary use or application of a concept such as the concept of honesty as the direct mental apprehension of a member of the Realm of Ideas, called 'honesty'. This type of theory has the merit of accommodating the fact that concepts, so to speak, transcend the particular subjects or persons that think them on particular occasions: concepts retain their identity independently of their being thought of by any particular individual, at any particular moment. Moreover, the Platonic type of theory clearly recognises that talk about concepts is totally different from talk about physical objects. It

is for this very reason that two different types of worlds are postulated. However, one of its serious drawbacks is that it fails to give a plausible account of the relationship supposed to exist between a thinker and the concept he thinks. To qualify this relation as a 'Wesenschau', some sort of inner mental glance thrown in the direction of the Realm of Ideas is not very helpful. On the contrary, it only paves the way to disaster. If the apprehension of Platonic Entities is construed as some kind of seeing, then, since seeing involves the application of concepts to what is seen, the apprehension of Platonic Entities will itself involve the application of concepts to those Entities. In short, the Platonic account given of the application of concepts is such that any given application of a concept prerequisites the antecedent application of a concept, and so on ad infinitum. This infinite regress renders the occurrence of any applications of concepts logically impossible. I submit that the Platonic type of theory cannot help us to square talk about concepts with talk about our live thinkings.

A different type of theory of concepts is offered by John Locke. On his theory a concept is neither a physical thing, nor a Platonic Entity, but a mental thing inside one's mind. For example, to think about a cat comes to having a mental image or a picture of a cat before one's mind's eye. At first sight this theory may seem to offer a much better account of the way in which concepts enter into our live thinkings, but a closer examination will reveal that psychologism is its radical defect: If a concept is nothing but a particular image in some particular mind, there is no ground for accepting that concepts have a validity beyond the concrete thoughts of particular individuals. This means, inter alia, that we could at best state that a certain person has a certain thought: it would, however, be impossible to evaluate his thought as correct or incorrect, as true or false, for to do so would be to go beyond the mere fact that he is having that thought. Another difficulty with the Lockean theory is that we are hard put to specify the images, or pictures, associated with such concepts as those of infinity, possibility, absurdity and seven hundred and twenty three.

Having discredited the contention that concepts are Platonic Entities or Lockean images, it may now appear philosophically hygienic simply to identify the thinking of a thought with the use of a certain word or words. To apply the concept of cat would then simply be using the word 'cat' correctly. Attractive as this view may seem, it involves the untenable identification of thinking with language. There are lots of instances of think-

ing that do not involve language. A pianist playing on the piano and a tennis player executing a stroke on the centre court are both thinking, but they need not be saying anything, either to themselves, or aloud. The use of language is not a necessary condition for thinking, but one form of thinking among others. If thinking were essentially saying, and if we accept, as we should, that saying differs from mere babbling in that only the former involves any thinking, then in order to say something sensible, I shall be required to think first, i.e. to say something, in order to say whatever sensible thing I wanted to say in the first place. This gets a vicious regress going. In order to think what I'm saying, I must first say something, and for the latter to be thoughtful, I must, on the identification of thinking with saying, yet again antecedently say something, and so on ad infinitum. Nevertheless, the move to identify thinking with saying is, I think, a move in the right direction. As I see it, there are basically two types of theories of concepts: entity theories, and functional theories. According to the former, a concept is some sort of entity or other, e.g. a Platonic Idea or a Lockean image-in-the-mind. I have argued that these theories cannot, in principle, systematically account both for our talk about concepts and our talk about live thinkings. Very roughly, the Platonic theory accommodates the fact that concepts are non-spatial, non-temporal items, interconnected by means of logical relations, at the expense of a plausible account of the way in which concepts enter into our live thinkings; with the Lockean theory things are the other way round. Locke tries to give a plausible account of our live thinkings at the expense of doing justice to the logical status of concepts. According to the functional type of theory, thinking or using a concept does not take the shape of some inner mental contact with some non-physical entity; it consists in the performance of perfectly ordinary and familiar actions of a verbal and/or non-verbal nature.

Consider the following simple example in support of the functional theory. A child is given a set of objects consisting of books, toys, marbles, and blocks, some of which are red whilst differing and agreeing in some other respects such as weight, size and shape. The child proceeds to put some of the items into a large box. After a while we notice that all the objects he puts in the box are red. But he is not only handling red ones, he also handles some of the non-red ones in certain ways save that of depositing them in the box. I then join in by putting a green marble and a white block into the box. The child protests, removes these items from the box, and puts them aside. When I put a red ball and a red motor-car in the box, he no longer protests. Surely, we have no hesitation in saying that the

child has the concept of redness, and that he is, then and there, applying that concept. To describe him as *having* that concept is to say that he is capable of performing certain relatively easy tasks such as picking out the red objects from a set of items, some of which are not red, and to reject, in some way or other, the non-red ones. And to describe the child as *then and there using* the concept of redness, is to say that he is actively engaged in the performance of those tasks. It is pertinent to note that the child's performances need not include his saying certain things, either to himself or aloud. His handlings of the objects may, but need not, be prefaced or accompanied by his uttering phrases or sentences in which the word 'red' occurs. Clearly, the use of the word 'red' is not a necessary condition for the application of the concept of redness. Both verbal and non-verbal performances of a certain kind are constitutive of the child's application of the concept.

But once we have decided that the thinking of concepts is to be construed in terms of our familiar actions, puzzles remain. An action is, of course, always concrete: it is the action of some particular individual acting in some particular situation. So, how are we to account for concepts as non-temporal, non-spatial items on the functional theory? What exactly is the connection between abstract concepts and concrete action?

We regularly engage in certain actions and patterns of actions on the basis of which we are describable in terms of thinking-descriptions such as the following:

Jones thinks that ...  
Smith believes that ...  
Peter surmises that ...  
Sarah contends that ...  
Jack knows that ...  
Shirley sees that ...  
Van remembers that ...  
Stan wonders whether ...  
Joe realises that ... etc.

These descriptions clearly share a common factor indicated by means of the dots. This factor is a proposition or statement. In other words, in the place of the dots we may make substitutions such as the following:

The kettle boils.  
The dog is lost.  
Richard Nixon was elected President in 1972.

The cost of living has risen by 7½% over the last six months.

Over-acidity and tension cause ulcers.

All-perfection of the Deity entails His existence.

These examples cover, I think, a fairly wide spectrum of the sorts of things that we may think, believe, surmise, wonder about, etc. Now sometimes we have special reasons for taking an interest in what Peter, John, Sarah, or Dick, knows, believes, sees, or conjectures. For example, a history teacher may be anxious to know whether little Johnny knows that Nixon won the election in 1972; a wife may be anxious to decide whether her husband has realised that the cost of living has increased by 7½%; and a philosophy tutor may be interested to know whether a certain pupil has actually grasped the ontological proof for the existence of the Deity. In all these cases the emphasis is on some particular *person*: on what he or she, as individuals among other members of society, thinks, realises, knows, etc. In contrast to the interest taken in what certain *individuals* think, believe, etc., there is the *non-personal* interest in *what* may be thought, known, surmised, realised, doubted, contended, etc. For example, we may discuss, independently of the thinkings of any particular friend or foe, the implications, the tenability, the truth or falsity, of such statements as 'The cost of living has increased by 7½%' and 'Perfection entails existence'. In this type of discussion it is not relevant that one Jones, or one Jackson, contended or still contends that the cost of living has increased by 7½%, or that perfection entails existence. Forget about Jones, and forget about Jackson: we can discuss their claims or statements in abstraction from their personalities and their concrete situations. Nevertheless, in considering their claims, and in talking about the said features of their statements considered merely as statements, we are always, and necessarily, considering these statements as *actual or possible candidates functioning as substitution instances completing a thinking-description applicable to some individual or other*. In this way a statement becomes disconnected, so to speak, from the spatio-temporal references contained in thinking-descriptions referring to specific individuals. But of course, this does not mean that a statement acquires all of a sudden the status of a funny sort of *thing*, existing outside space and time. It only means that spatio-temporal epithets are logically inappropriate in the context of talk about statements.

I am particularly set on combating the assumption that every logically distinct kind of talk requires a special kind of entity or occurrence in order to make sense. My contention is that

talk about statements is logically parasitic upon talk about the thinkings or doings of persons, and although the former kind of talk is totally different from the latter kind of talk, it is a blunder to postulate two, or even three, different worlds in order to make sense of them. I suggest that we can make sense of these kinds of talk without the multiplication of entities; indeed, as I tried to show, the multiplication of entities a La Plato and Locke can only fail to make sense both of our abstract talk about concepts, and of our talk about the concrete doings and thinkings of persons. Consider the following analogies. Jones' face consists of certain separable parts such as his ears and nose of which we can give independent descriptions, and such descriptions will certainly be included in anything like a more or less complete description of his face. Such a description will also include descriptions of the complexion, expression, and profile of his face. But these, although separately mentionable or separately discriminable features of his face, are not separate or separable parts of his face. Likewise, talk about the climate of a certain region is certainly very different from talk about the day to day weather conditions such as the sunshine, wind directions, rain, atmospheric pressure, etc. But this does not mean that the climate is something over and above the day to day weather conditions.

I argued that statements are abstractions from ranges of thinking-descriptions. I now suggest that concepts, in their turn, are similarly abstractions from statements. Just as a statement is a factor or feature common to a range of thinking-descriptions, so on a higher level of abstraction, a concept is a factor or feature common to a range of statements. For example, in the statement 'Responsibility entails freedom' the logical connection of entailment is said to hold between the concept of freedom and the concept of responsibility. The cash-value of this is that a statement in which the concept of responsibility figures, entails a corresponding statement in which the concept of freedom figures. Thus the statement 'Jones is responsible for doing X' entails the corresponding statement 'Jones did X out of his own free will'. It is clear that talk about concepts is even more abstract than talk about statements, since it is removed yet another level from what is concrete or spatio-temporal. Nevertheless, abstract talk about concepts is ultimately to be cashed in terms of the concrete doings of persons. There is a hierarchy of distinctions involved in all this. On the ground level there are the *doings*, verbal and non-verbal, of individual persons. On the second level there is the *talk about the doings* of persons, i.e. the level of *thinking-descriptions*. On the third level we engage in *talk about statements* as factors

common to the thinking-descriptions on the level below it. Finally, on the fourth level we engage in *talk about concepts* when we focus attention on a factor or feature common to the statements on the third level. This hierarchy is clearly a logical, and not an ontological one. I repeat that although talk about concepts is very different from talk about the ordinary doings or thinkings of persons, it does not follow that talk about concepts requires special entities and occurrences over and above those perfectly ordinary doings. The term 'abstract' signifies a logical, not an ontological setting.

I summarise by saying that I hope to have squared abstract talk about concepts with concrete talk about the live thinkings of persons by showing that the former is logically parasitic upon the latter without this incurring any multiplicity of acts and entities over and above our ordinary doings. And to the question: How do non-spatial, non-temporal items such as concepts enter into our live thinkings? my answer is: Concepts do not, strictly speaking, enter into our thinking *operations* at all; they enter only into the *descriptions* of those thinkings. A concept is a *logical* construction; it is not an *entity*, and a fortiori not a *non-physical* entity. It has a logical, not an *ontological* status, if we are to insist on it's having a *status* at all.