

Concepts

Course Description

This course will investigate the nature of concepts. Looking at material from philosophy and psychology it will investigate what kind of things concepts are and how they are structured. Other topics covered include the questions of whether concepts are internal or external, subjective or objective, and what their relationship is with natural and social categories in world.

Background reading

- Margolis and Laurence (1999) “Concepts and Cognitive Science” in *Concepts: Core Readings* (p.3-81).
- Jesse Prinz (2002) *Furnishing the Mind*.

Seminar 1: What are concepts for?

Required readings:

- Jesse Prinz (2002), *Furnishing the Mind*: Chapter 1.
- Jerry A. Fodor (1998), *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*: Chapter 2 (Note: Don't worry too much about understanding Fodor's 'Representational' Theory of Mind (RTM)).

Suggested readings:

- Jerry A. Fodor (1998), *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*: pp.1-6 (Stop at section: 'RTM'); (Oxford University Press).
- Gottlob Frege (1914), “Abstract from a letter to Jourdain”:
http://mind.ucsd.edu/syllabi/00-01/phil235/a_readings/frege_jourdain.html
- Gottlob Frege (1892), “Sense and Reference”, *The Philosophical Review*, 57/3: 209-230.

Questions to consider:

1. What do we think concepts are, or what are they for?
2. Are there actually several things that we use the word 'concept' to refer to? And if so, do the requirements apply to only one of these things, or could the requirements be divided between them?
3. Of the 'requirements' for a theory of concepts that have been presented, which do you think are the most important, and which are least important?
4. What is the relationship between a concept and a word meaning?

Seminar 2: Metaphysics of concepts: Mental representations vs abstract objects

Required readings:

- Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence (2011), “Concepts” (SEP): Sections 1.1 and 1.3.
- Georges Rey (1985), “Concepts and Conceptions” (Note: Rey is responding to another paper here, but don’t worry about that as we will be considering the exchange in full in week 5.)

Suggested readings:

- Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence (2007), “The Ontology of Concepts – Abstract Objects or Mental Representations?”, *Nous*, 41/2: 561-593.
- Gottlob Frege (1892), “On Sense and Reference”, *The Philosophical Review*, 57/3: 209- 230.
- Christopher Peacocke (2005) “Rationale and Maxims in the Study of Concepts”, *Nous*, 39/1: 167-178.

Questions to consider:

1. Are both sides of the abstract objects/mental representations debate talking about the same thing? Are they *trying* to talk about the same thing?
2. Are abstract objects really the kinds of things that could be the object of fruitful conceptual analysis?
3. Is one side more convincing/easier to defend when it comes to word meanings rather than concepts?
4. How do the arguments for and against concepts as abstract objects relate to the requirements for theories of concepts we discussed in lecture 1?

Seminar 3: Theories of concepts: Concept empiricism

Required readings:

- David Hume (1738) *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part 1, (Note: You can skip sections 5 and 6).
- Jesse Prinz (2005), “The Return of Concept Empiricism”.

Suggested readings:

- John Locke (1690), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II.
- Jesse Prinz (2002), *Furnishing the Mind*: Chapters 5-9; (MIT Press).
- Edouard Machery (2007), “Concept empiricism: A methodological critique”, *Cognition*, 104: 19-46.
- Jesse Prinz (2010) "Can Concept Empiricism Forestall Eliminativism?", *Mind and Language*, 25/5: 612-621.

Questions to consider:

1. Can you claim that some concepts are perceptually-based, if you are not an empiricist? (What about basic concepts like ‘the colour red’?)
2. How could someone be wrong about a perceptually-based concept?
3. Is Prinz right that there might be ways of dealing with all abstract concepts by finding perceptual ways to capture/represent them?
4. One of the great strengths of empiricism about concepts is that it is able to explain concept acquisition. What ways might concepts be acquired if they were not perceptually-based?

Seminar 4: Theories of concepts: Prototype theory

Required readings:

- Edward E. Smith (1995), “Concepts and Categorization”.
- Lawrence Barsalou (1987), “The Instability of Graded Structure” (Note: Only read pp.101-14; you can stop when you hit *Implications for the nature of concepts*).

Suggested readings:

- Rosch and Mervis (1975), “Family Resemblances: Studies in the Internal Structure of Categories”, *Cognitive Psychology*, 7: 573-605.
- Eleanor Rosch (1973), "Natural Categories", *Cognitive Psychology*, 4: 328-350.
- Edward E. Smith and Douglas L. Medin (1981), *Categories and Concepts*, (Harvard University Press).

Questions to consider:

1. Could our behaviour be a guide to our concepts, and if so, what kinds of behaviour?
2. Would there be a reason for those who do not believe that concepts are mental representations to consider studies in psychology?
3. What kinds of theories of concepts are empirically testable?

Seminar 5: Theories of concepts: Classical theory

Required readings:

- Georges Rey (1983), “Concepts and Stereotypes”.

Suggested readings:

- Jerry A. Fodor (1998), *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*: Chapter 3; (Oxford University Press).
- William Labov (1973), “The Boundaries of Words and Their Meanings”, In C. J. N. Bailey & R. W. Shuy (Eds.), *New Ways of Analysing Variation in English*, (Georgetown University Press): 340-373.

Questions to consider:

1. Is the classical theory really about concepts, or about is it about categories?
 2. What does Rey mean when he talks about the distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological role of concepts? Is he correct in believing that an account of concepts should be focused on metaphysics and not epistemology?
 3. Does Rey identify evidence for his metaphysical arguments, and if so, what form does this evidence take?
 4. Do you think that the psychology evidence discussed in Seminar 4 (Smith, 1995) can tell us about the nature of concepts?
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Seminar 6: Theories of concepts: Theory theory

Required readings:

- Margolis and Laurence (1999) “Concepts and Cognitive Science”, (Note: Read section 4: “The Theory-Theory of Concepts”, pp.43-51).
- Susan Gelman (2004), “Psychological Essentialism in Children”.

Suggested readings:

- Murphy, & Medin (1999), "The Role of Theories in Conceptual Coherence", [Reprint of 1985 article]; In E. Margolis & S. Laurence (Eds.), *Concepts: Core Readings*, (MIT Press): 425-458.
- Michael Strevens (2000), “The Essentialist Aspect of Naive Theories”, *Cognition*, 74/2:149-75.

- Susan Carey (2009), *The Origin of Concepts*: Chapters 1 and 2; (Oxford University Press).
- Gregory Murphy (2002), *The Big Book of Concepts*, (MIT Press).

Questions to consider:

1. On Theory Theory, what would it take for people to share concepts? What would it take for them to *behave* as if they shared concepts?
2. What are other ways of interpreting the evidence presented by Gelman?
3. What kinds of things (if any) have essences, and what form do those essences take?
4. What are the similarities between psychological essentialism, and the hypothesis of external definitions, discussed in Seminar 5?

Seminar 7: Theories of concepts: Atomism

Required readings:

- Jerry Fodor (1995), “Concepts: A Potboiler”.
- Kevan Edwards (2009), “What Concepts Do”.

Suggested readings:

- Katz and Nagel (1974), “Meaning Postulates and Semantic Theory”, *Foundations of Language*, 11/3: 311-340.
- Fodor and Lepore (1992), *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide*, (Blackwell).

Questions to consider:

1. Fodor builds his argument for the compositionality requirement on examples from language. Are you convinced by his argument?
2. What does it mean to have a particular concept? Or what does someone need to have to possess (or demonstrate that they possess) a specific concept?
3. Could one be a conceptual atomist without believing that concepts should be individuated according to reference? Could one not be an atomist (so hold that the prototype theory of concepts is true) and still believe that concepts are or should be individuated according to reference?

Seminar 8: Concept externalism: Natural concepts

Required readings:

- Hilary Putnam (1975), “The Meaning of Meaning” (Note: Read to the end of p.152).
- Saul Kripke (1981), *Naming and Necessity*, (Note: Read section provided, pp.106-140. Don't be put off by the length - the pages are very small.)

Suggested readings:

- Ian Hacking (2007), “Putnam’s Theory of Natural Kinds and Their Names is Not the Same as Kripke’s”, *Principia*, 11/1: 1-24.
- Barbara Malt (1994), “Water is Not H₂O”, *Cognitive Psychology*, 27: 41-70.
- Tyler Burge (1986), “Intellectual Norms and the Foundations of Mind”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 83: 697-720.
- Consuelo Preti (1992), “Opacity, belief and analyticity”, *Philosophical Studies*, 66/3: 297-306.

Questions to consider:

1. What exactly is Putnam arguing? Is his point about thought or language?
2. Do both Kripke and Putnam believe that things have essences? Do they give accounts of what kinds of things essences might be?
3. If experts determine the extensions of our concepts, how do we work out who the experts are? What if they disagree with one another?
4. Do we share a ‘water’ concept with Oscar? Do we share a ‘twin-water’ concept with Twin Oscar?

Seminar 9: Concept externalism: Social concepts*Required readings:*

- Tyler Burge (1979), “Individualism and the Mental” (Note: Read to the end of IIIc, p.99).
- Brian Loar (1985) “Social Content and Psychological Content”.

Suggested readings:

- Gabriel M. A. Segal, (2000), *A Slim Book About Narrow Content*, (MIT Press).

Questions to consider:

1. If concepts are determined by one’s social or linguistic community, does this extend to natural concepts?

2. What does it mean to say that Alf shares an arthritis concept with his doctor? What if he had forgotten the word ‘arthritis’, or thought it was actually called “art-hit-is”?
3. On the social externalist account, can the person who does not know the local language nonetheless share concepts with members of the local linguistic community?

Seminar 10: Concept internalism

Required readings:

- Katalin Farkas (2003), “What is Externalism?”.
- Tim Crane (1982), “All the Difference in the World”.

Suggested readings:

- Frances Egan (1991), “Must Psychology be Individualistic?”, *Phil Review*, 100/2: 179-203.
- Pierre Jacob (1992), “Externalism and Mental Causation”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 92: 203-219.
- Gabriel Segal (2000), *A Slim Book about Narrow Content*, (MIT Press).
- Katalin Farkas (2008), *The Subject’s Point of View*, (Oxford University Press).

Questions to consider:

1. Could one be an internalist with a viable theory of concepts? What are the specific problems that the internalist is most likely to face when talking about concepts?
2. Can Farkas’ account handle subconscious or unconscious thoughts? Does it need to account for these kinds of thoughts?
3. Can you think of ways that one might be an internalist about mental content that are different to Farkas’ theory of ‘subjective indistinguishability’?
4. How could an internalist account for people ever having incorrect beliefs about their concepts?
