

Concepts

Philosophy focuses on (and creates) concepts, which are normally seen as the building blocks of all thinking. It has been suggested that 'concept' is too ambiguous to be useful, but extensive discussion and research has focused on trying to understand what concepts are. They may be the explanation of how mind links to world. A concept is a component of thought which is distinct enough to be contemplated in isolation. Small words like 'to' and 'or' may be too simple to count as concepts, and 'people with eight-syllable first names' is possibly too complex to count as a concept. We tend to focus on concepts which are compact, but have some substantial content.

Most aspects of concepts are controversial, starting with their **origin**. An early view claimed that important concepts were the blueprints of the cosmos, existing independently from humanity, but available to us for thinking. This view is still defended, notably when applied to concepts of logic and mathematics. Empiricists challenge this, by insisting that all concepts arise from experience; hence the analysis of any concept leads back to the experiences that produced it. This is a persuasive theory for concepts of physical objects, but harder to defend for concepts which are abstract, and remote from the physical world. Some concepts seem to be understood a priori, and may be produced merely by thinking. It may even be that a lot of concepts are hardwired into our brains (are 'innate'), as a result of evolution, rather than experience or thought. Among empiricists, some claim that experience itself produces the concept (so that seeing birds inevitably produces the concept 'bird' in humans), while others see the origin of concepts as more creative (the concept 'bird' being a flash of genius, helping us to grasp the world). Even animals must distinguish the birds, by noticing the features they possess, so reality must contribute to concepts.

The **purpose** of concepts seems to be for identification, categorisation and planning. A proper name is a label rather than a concept, so concepts are mostly 'universals' – being equally applicable in a variety of situations. Hence concepts hold specific useful information, but are not too precise. Identifying a 'bird' invokes a store of facts about them, if needed; without specifying the colour, size or character of the bird. The concept of 'between' gives a relation, but no relata. Not only do we use concepts to grasp the world, but we can also **think about** concepts, especially if they are named by a word. Propositional attitudes (belief, fear, hope, denial etc) focus on concepts (if you say 'I love birds'). By comparing concepts we can also recognise patterns, regular causal relationships, logical implications, hierarchical relationships, inclusions (of birds among 'creatures'), dependence relations, and what is conceivable (which concepts must you already know, to learn a new concept). The inductive mode of thought (learning from experience) relies on concepts to link a series of observations into a generalisation. Concepts can also be modified. We include penguins among the birds, but reject dolphins from the fish. We can raise or lower the standard of what counts as a 'circle'. We can split or subdivide concepts, by the use of adjectives, or new words. We can think about 'the economy' as if it is an object, with distinctive properties.

There are several views about the **role** which concepts play in thought. One view says that concepts are *incomplete*, because whole judgements are the basis of thought, and so concepts only spring to life when they are employed (so that '..... is a bird' needs the gap to be filled). This emphasises the linguistic aspect of concepts, and it has been claimed that concepts are entirely linguistic (and thus non-existent in animals), but most research focuses on their role in thought rather than language. A pragmatic approach thinks of concepts as *abilities*, seen in the skill of linking a sight of some birds with information about migration. This view is more dynamic, and even emphasises the future consequences of employing each concept. A more inward-looking view says that concepts are *representations*, which somehow encode connected slices of experience, making them available for thought. Thus a concept is like a cog wheel – a step in a chain of processes. Such concepts have no content, but just point outwards to the world, and inwards to other thoughts. In themselves, the concepts are seen as unanalysable atoms.

Most theorists try to explain concepts by characterising their **content**, and four main theories have emerged. The earliest account (now labelled the '**classical**' view) says that each concept has an implicit (or even explicit) definition, which fixes the necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept's application. Psychological research has discredited this view, because it fails to capture what is typical or atypical of a concept, and oversimplifies what really happens. For example, a 'tree house' fails to fit the definition of a house, and a seat is defined as furniture, but no one accepts a 'car seat' as furniture. Most of us would struggle to define the concepts we use.

Research has revealed that the users of a concept are often aware of a typical specimen (a '**prototype**'), which is their main reference for the content of a concept. Thus a pigeon is close to the normal prototype for 'bird', but a penguin is not. This seems to accurately reflect the way we think, and explains the speed with which we can identify something, by reference to typical features. Doubts have emerged about this theory, because what is typical varies a lot according to experience, many concepts seem to have no prototype, and one thing may be the prototype for several concepts (such as a chicken for 'farm fowl' and 'food'). We are also aware of the potential variety in a concept (the huge range of birds), which a single prototype fails to capture.

To explain this variety, an alternative view says that concepts contain a set of **exemplars**, specimens illustrating the range of possibilities (from wrens to vultures to penguins). Research suggests that we do indeed cite a range of examples when questioned about a concept, and our ability to add or reject examples matches the flexibility of concepts. There is a deeper problem, though, with both the prototype and exemplar theories, which is how we decide that some entity (such as a particular bird) qualifies as a prototype or example. Why is a flying fish not a bird?

The fourth theory claims that the content of a concept is more complex than a few specimens, and contains criteria, properties and behaviour for the object of the concept. In effect a concept is a theory (so this view is called the '**theory theory**' of concepts, or the 'knowledge' theory). Hence the question of whether some new item is covered by the concept is a complex matter, which may take time to evaluate. We still need to explain why most such decisions are very quick (implying priorities within the theory), but indecision over tricky cases is a familiar experience.