

## On the explanatory value of the concept-conception distinction

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**Abstract** The distinction between concept and conception has been widely debated in political philosophy, whereas in the philosophy of psychology is frequently used, but rarely focused on. This paper aims at filling in this lacuna. I claim that far from being explanatorily idle, the distinction makes it possible to provide an adequate description of phenomena such as genuine disagreement, and concept contestation, which would otherwise remain implausibly puzzling. I illustrate and assess three accounts of the concept-conception distinction. Finally I propose a social externalist account, which relies on deference to experts, and builds on Tyler Burge's ideas of many decades ago. The debate on concepts and conceptions thus shows a connection with the increasing research work on experts and expertise in psychology and social epistemology.

**Keywords:** concepts, conceptions, experts, contestation, disagreement

### 0. Introduction

'Concept' is a theoretical term in both philosophical and psychological theories. Some authors have put into question the existence of concepts as natural kinds, with homogeneous properties out there to be explained (MACHERY 2009, MALT 2010). Many others, however, concede the point but claim that concepts are part of the *explanans* in cognitive science and philosophy, their function being to enable us to describe and give accounts of phenomena such as language understanding, inference, categorization, decision-making and deliberation (WEISKOPF 2010, LALUMERA 2010, HAMPTON 2010). According to these authors there are phenomena that we would not be able to explain adequately without the notion of concept.

In line with this broad view, this is a conservative paper. My aim here is to defend the view that, far from being theoretically idle, the notion of concept should be supplemented by a more thorough understanding of the *concept-conception* distinction. In fact, the notion of concept is not fine-grained enough in some explanatory contexts. I claim that phenomena such as genuine disagreement and concept contestation can be better described in terms of both concepts *and* conceptions, and would otherwise remain implausibly puzzling.

Intuitively, conceptions stand to concepts as do many to one, and conceptions can be wrong, and get corrected. Though familiar, however, the concept-conception distinction is rarely focused on. Some material can be found in the debate in political philosophy, in the discussion following John Rawls, and Richard Dworkin's work

(RAWLS 1999, DWORKIN 1988). In the philosophy of mind and psychology Susan Carey (2009), Ruth Millikan (2000), Georges Rey (1985, 2010), and less recently Christopher Peacocke (1992, 1998) wrote about the two notions. In what follows I will individuate two different ways to draw the concept-conception distinction (sections 1 and 2), and confront them vis-à-vis the explanatory desiderata posed by cases of genuine disagreement, and concept contestation, which I present in the fourth section, drawing on well-known examples by Tyler Burge, Timothy Williamson, and W. B. Gallie (1956).

One clarification before starting. Some philosophers of psychology think that the notion of concept is ambiguous between the philosophical and the psychological usage. Supporters of the ambiguity view point to the fact that concepts for philosophers are abstract objects, while concepts for psychologists are mental particulars (MARGOLIS and LAURENCE 2007); that philosophers are concerned with the semantics of concepts while psychologists are not (MACHERY 2009); that – in a similar vein – concepts for philosophers determine their extensions, while concepts for psychologists do not, or they determine a different extension (MARGOLIS and LAURENCE 2007); and finally, that philosophers narrow the scope of conceptual capacities to rational deliberation and language understanding only, whereas psychologists broaden it (MACHERY 2009). In this paper I do not provide arguments against the ambiguity view, but I assume the rival position, namely the view that ‘concept’ is a polysemous word, whose philosophical and psychological meaning are related. One way to relate them is to agree that concepts constitute a functional kind posited to explain some traits of human behaviour, as I said above (WEISKOPF 2010, LALUMERA 2010), and that (typical) psychological theories and (typical) philosophical theories of concepts diverge on the agenda of what has to be explained and in what order (CAREY 2009). I will suggest that conceptions may deserve the same status.

### **1. The teleological account of the concept-conception distinction**

One platitude drawn from our everyday usage of the concept-conception distinction is that it implies a one-to-many relation, that is, many conceptions can and usually do correspond to the same concept. Here is the *locus classicus* where this intuition is spelled out - John Rawls, about the concept and different conceptions of justice:

Existing societies are of course seldom well-ordered in this sense, for what is just and unjust is usually in dispute. Men disagree about which principles should define the basic terms of their association. Yet we may still say, despite this disagreement, that they each have a conception of justice. That is, they understand the need for, and they are prepared to affirm, a characteristic set of principles for assigning basic rights and duties and for determining what they take to be the proper distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation. Thus it seems natural to think of the concept of justice as distinct from the various conceptions of justice and as being specified by the role which these different sets of principles, these different conceptions, have in common (1999, 5).

Let me remark here that I am not entering into Rawls’s exegesis, my concern being only to abstract out one way to draw the concept-conception distinction. Here, Rawls

is concerned with the analysis of the concept of justice, and he is telling us that there are various conceptions of justice in different societies, corresponding to one and the same concept. What is common to those conceptions is the role they play, namely, the role of specifying “principles for assigning rights and duties..”. Thus, a possible reading of the passage has it that different conceptions (of justice) stand to the concept (of justice) as do different ways to fill out a role. If this reading is right, then the one-to-many relation of concepts and conceptions can be described as the one-to-many relations of means to an end. Let us call it the *teleological account* of the concept-conception distinction.

A similar position can be found in the recent philosophy of psychology, in Ruth Millikan’s work on concepts. It is important to notice here that Rawls and Millikan are involved in different kinds of explanatory projects. Rawls is concerned with conceptual analysis conceived as the description of abstract objects, while Millikan’s interest is in the explanation of human cognition. However, they can be both described as having a teleological account of the concept-conception distinction. Millikan is also explicit in having a teleological theory of concepts. Her view is that (at least some) concepts are abilities to reidentify regularities in one’s social and natural environment, and each concept-ability is identified by its function or end, not by the means it involves (MILLIKAN 2000). The various specific means to the same end are called ‘conceptions’ – each of which is fallible, and can have many components. Here is the quote:

Call the sum of the various ways that you have of recognizing a thing or, what amounts to the same, of recognizing when you are receiving information about a thing, your "conception" of that thing. Your conceptions of most common things have many components, for you have many ways of recognizing these things --no infallible ways, of course, but many fairly reliable ways. Whatever you know about a thing is part of your conception of it too, for whatever you know might help you to identify it, or help prevent you from misidentifying it, under some circumstances (2005, 69).

To go back to our main line, according to a teleological account of the concept-conception distinction concepts are likely to turn out to be shared across subjects and times, while conceptions are likely to be different. So for example, as Rawls tells us, people can share the concept of justice and yet disagree on what counts as justice (in terms of principles, but it could also be in terms of best examples, or ways of identifying cases of justice).

## **2. The internal-external account**

A second pre-theoretical feature of the concept-conception distinction is that the concept represents what a category is, while conceptions may be wrong, or partial. This kind of normative role of concepts over conceptions is captured by the second way to spell out the difference, which I call the “internal-external account” of the concept-conception distinction. In his work on concepts within the Fregean tradition, Christopher Peacocke (1992) observes that some times subjects who are competent in the use of a concept are nevertheless unable to formulate or describe it (in fact, the difficulties of conceptual analysis classically conceived shows that we are almost always able to employ our concepts in a way that goes beyond the guidance provided

by any explicit description we can give of them). Here are some examples he gives. First, all of us master the concept of chair, but experience difficulty in spelling out exactly what counts as a chair. A beginning student of logic might be unable to provide an explication of the concept of conjunction, but might nevertheless be able to judge and infer perfectly well with conjunction. Peacocke suggests that sometimes this incapacity can be overcome by a reflective exercise, in which one simulates to oneself cases of application of the concept and finally comes up with a proper rule for its use. But even in cases where this doesn't happen, Peacocke thinks that subjects who use concepts correctly possess an implicit conception – i.e., a mental representation at the subpersonal level – which is causally responsible for the cognitive tasks they perform with that concept. In other words, if the student has grasped the concept of conjunction, and shows that in cognitive tasks, then independently of her incapacity to find out and formulate the rules of conjunction, she has a conception of conjunction stored in her mind. Otherwise, her correct use would be a mystery – just like, Chomskyan linguists suppose, principles of grammar must be hypothesized at the subpersonal level in order to explain people's correct use of syntax (PEACOCKE 1998).

What does this take us with respect to the concept-conception distinction? Here, conceptions are contentful states of subjects that are causally responsible of their use of a concept, or internalizations of external criteria. Peacocke holds that concepts are abstract objects that people can grasp, as in the Fregean tradition (1992), so there is one concept – say, of chair, or conjunction – whose criteria of correct application are objective, and quite independent of each subject's mind, and different conceptions of it, one for each subject, or state of a subject. For example, I may say that logicians individuate and spell out the criteria of the concept of conjunction, and my own conception of conjunction changed with time, gradually approximating it. On this view, however, not all the possible conceptions are on a par. Not all internalizations of the public criteria of correctness turn out to be accurate. Typically, some are incomplete, that is, the subject masters the concept in central cases of application, but she is uncertain or wrong about other cases, due to an incomplete internal representation of the public criteria. Think of cases of concepts of animal and plant species, or medical and legal concepts, for which the idea of an incomplete conception is particularly plausible.

Notice that this way to draw the concept-conception distinction is not exclusively tied to a Fregean theory of concepts, but rather it can be employed across the board. What is needed is an externalist account of concepts, namely, the idea that what determines the individuation of a concept is not just internal to each human mind. The gist is just that conceptions are internal to subjects, while the criteria for concept application are public and shared. Essentialism in psychology is a view that fits well with this model. Essentialists point out that most of us believe that “certain categories (e.g., women, racial groups, dinosaurs, original Picasso artwork) have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly. Furthermore, this underlying reality (or essence) is thought to give objects their identity, and to be responsible for similarities that category members share” (CAREY 2005). From this, they infer that people's conceptions have a ‘placeholder’ for what experts know (MEDIN & ORTONY 1989, CAREY 2009).

From the point of view of the explanatory power, the internal-external account of the distinction equals the teleological account. Subjects can have different and competing conceptions of one and the same concept. Here, however, the additional idea is that just *one* conception is correct and complete, and the others will eventually

turn out wrong or incomplete. The need of a normative role of concepts over conceptions is very well stressed by Georges Rey, who has insisted on the necessity of the distinction for three decades now:

We need to distinguish the concept of something from merely the (epistemic) conceptions of it that have been too much the focus of the psychological research (...). Concepts are what remain stable across variability in conceptions, and so give argument a point, framing the questions of what people could learn and what might be the limits of reason and thought (2010, 222).

### **3. Genuine disagreement, concept contestation, and essentially contested concepts**

In this section I present three kind of cases in which a description in terms of the concept-conception distinction turns out to be illuminating. All the three cases come from well-known philosophers's work, and were introduced for other reasons than to defend or characterize the concept-conception distinction. My aim here is to focus on the cases, and not on the debates in which they were originally included. The first case involves the concept of sofa, and a very bizarre subject. Here is the complete quote from Tyler Burge's paper:

We begin by imagining a person A in our community who has a normal mastery of English. A's early instruction in the use of 'sofa' is mostly ostensive, though he picks up the normal truisms. A can use the term reliably. At some point, however, A doubts the truisms and hypothesizes that sofas function not as furnishings to be sat on, but as works of art or religious artifacts. He believes that the usual remarks about the function of sofas conceal, or represent a delusion about, an entirely different practice. A admits that some sofas have been sat upon, but thinks that most sofas would collapse under any considerable weight and denies that sitting is what sofas are pre-eminently for (2009, 263).

Though bizarre, A is neither irrational nor unsophisticated. In fact, he is a sort of conspiracy theorist about sofas, but he shares with us the basic insights of scientific method:

A may attack the veridicality of many of our memories of sofas being sat upon, on the grounds that the memories are products of the delusion. A is willing to test his hypothesis empirically, and the sociological tests he proposes are reasonable. A also offers to demonstrate by experiment how the delusive memories are produced. He is sophisticated, and the tests would require elaborate controls. We can even imagine that the theory is developed so as to be compatible with all past experience that might be thought to have falsified his theory. Thus a normal but sophisticated conception of confirmation accompanies A's unusual theory. We may imagine that if we were to carry out his proposed experiments, A would come to admit that his theory is mistaken (Burge 2009, 264).

Burge's sofa case is very well-known in the literature about semantic externalism, the view that the meaning of terms and concepts is at least partially out of our mind. What concerns us here, however, is just the question: how are we to describe our thoughts, and A's thoughts? One possibility would be that A's thoughts and our

thoughts contain different concepts, namely our concept of sofa, and his own concept of sofa. This means that in the scenario A and us are talking past each other when using “sofa” – a case of *prima facie* or apparent disagreement, where in fact there is equivocation of what is said or what the thought is about. This, however, would not be an accurate rendering of the case described. The first reason is that A agrees with us with much – paradigmatic cases of sofas, typical examples, and in most of property production and recognition tasks A would turn out to be in line with us. So there is a concept we share. Second reason, our disagreement with A could not be put to an end by disambiguation, that is, by simply admitting that we are using the term ‘sofa’ differently, or we are employing different concepts. Not at all: A wants to persuade us that he is right and we are wrong *on the same topic*, and our intuition is just that *he* is wrong. What we disagree with him about is rather the essence of sofas, or sofa-theories. What we have in common is some general representation of sofas that we can apply to common cases. The situation resembles Rawls’ case of different societies competing for different conceptions of justice, while having one and the same concept. A has a different conception of sofa than we have, in other words, A’s conception and ours are rival conceptions of sofas. The concept-conception distinction allows us to describe the case in terms of genuine disagreement without losing the intuition of a shared competence. A further question is whether the teleological account of the distinction, or rather the internal-external account would be more appropriate here. On the internal-external account as characterized above, just one conception is correct. While Burge’s position would definitely be in that direction, for the sake of our discussion the question can well remain open. Essentialism about artifacts – that they people tend to believe that they have an essence and tend to defer to experts – is empirically debated.

The second case I present is a more clear case of contestation, rather than mere disagreement. It comes from Tim Williamson’s critique of normative conceptual role semantics (WILLIAMSON 2007: 88-89). Among other things, Williamson wants to show that in general, speaker’s semantic competence is demanding and normative conceptual role theories are not adequate to describe this fact. Notice that here I am diverging from Williamson’s own intent – instead of getting rid of concepts (provided that they are individuated in terms of constitutive inferences, as in normative conceptual role semantics), I propose to reintroduce conceptions along with them. Here is the case. Peter is a native English speaker and a good logician. However, he refuses to accept that every vixen is a vixen, because he believes that existential quantification is existentially committing and that there are no vixens. He holds a conspiracy theory according to which vixens are in fact fictional creatures. Thus, according to Williamson, Peter qualifies as competent of the concept of vixen, and of the concept expressed by the quantifier ‘every’.

Williamson’s own description of Peter’s case involves a rejection of the view that concepts are individuated by constitutive inferences. Peter is plausibly competent even though he refuses to draw precisely those inferences that seem to hold a central place in the individuation of the concepts of vixen and of universal quantification. But granting that, how are we to describe his position with respect to ours, on vixens and logic? What is Peter contesting, and what is he sharing with us? If we use the concept-conception distinction we are in a position to say that Peter’s thoughts and our thoughts are of the same kind (vixen-thoughts). Peter, however, uses a different mean for the same end – referring to vixens – and has a different conception of quantifiers (maybe a deviant one, if we are realist enough). Also, Peter challenges us about who is the genuine experts about vixens and quantifiers, namely, who holds the

right conception. Starting from the view that there is a correct way to think about vixens and about universal quantification, he thinks he holds it. So again, the concept-conception distinction makes it possible to preserve both what is shared, and what is not shared in a case of concept contestation.

My third and final test-case for the concept-conception distinction is more puzzling than the first two. It was introduced by W.B. Gallie back in 1956, and it has unfortunately been neglected by philosophers of language and mind in recent years (one exception is CRILEY 2008, see also LAKOFF 2006). Gallie talks about the possibility of essentially contested concepts, namely, concepts for which there seem to be no way out of the disagreement among conceptions, but just endless dispute. I quote the full passage about an imaginary concept of championship of this sort, because I think it deserves full attention:

...now let us imagine a championship of the following kind. (I) In this championship each team specializes in a distinctive method, strategy and style of play of its own, to which all its members subscribe to the best of their ability. (II) "Championship" is not adjudged and awarded in terms of the highest number of markable successes, e.g., "scores", but in virtue of level of style or calibre. (No doubt for this to be manifested a certain minimum number of successes is necessary.) More simply, to be adjudged "the champions" means to be judged "to have played the game best". (III) "Championship" is not a distinction gained and acknowledged at a fixed time and for a fixed period. Games proceed continuously, and whatever side is acknowledged champion today knows it may perfectly well be caught up or surpassed tomorrow. (IV) Just as there is no "marking" or "points" system to decide who are the champions, so there are no official judges or strict rules of adjudication. Instead what happens is this. Each side has its own loyal kernel group of supporters, and in addition, at any given time, a number of "floating" supporters who are won over to support it because of the quality of its play-and, we might add, the loudness of its kernel supporters' applause and the persuasiveness of their comments. ...Moreover, at any given time, one side will have the largest (and loudest) group of supporters who, we may say, will effectively hail it as "the champions". But (V) the supporters of every contesting team regard and refer to their favoured team as "the champions" (perhaps allowing such qualifications as "the true champions", "the destined champions", "morally the champions" . . . and so on) (GALLIE 1956: 175).

Gallie's analysis is aimed at identifying a class of concepts that are essentially contested, namely, for which there seem to be to external criterion to adjudicate between competing conceptions, while at the same time no prejudiced way to single out any conception as incorrect on other reasons than formal ones. The examples he discusses are the concepts of art, democracy, social justice, and Christian. His further main points are that disagreements in that kind of cases are non dissolvable by mere disambiguation of lexical meaning, and not answerable to an underlying fact of the matter that could settle the issue. The latter condition makes disagreements (or 'contests') genuinely conceptual, and not about the joints of reality itself, while the former qualify them as genuine rather than apparent.

Again in this case the notion of concept alone would blur the issue, but for different reasons than those in play in Burge's and Williamson's cases. Supporters of different view of championship do not share the same concept, but compete with their conceptions in order to establish which concept should be adopted. The emphasis on the absence of a fact of the matter or convergence on the extension of 'champion'

suggests that this is the case. In terms of the teleological account of the concept-conception distinction, here what is at stake is not just what is the best means to a common end, but what is the best end. In terms of the external-internal account, the problem is not which conception is correct, but which standard of correctness ought to be adopted. Conceptions compete and concepts are not yet shared, because essentialist intuitions are weak. This kind of description is naturally appealing for concepts of the social sciences and arts.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that some work can be done with the concept-conception distinction in our psychological and philosophical theories of human behaviour. If my suggestion is convincing, then rather than abandoning the theoretical work on the notion of concept, philosophers and psychologists should refine it to provide the basis for such a distinction. I presented both the teleological way to draw the distinction, and the internal-external account, stressing that the idea of normative asymmetry belongs to the second, but not to the first one. Here are some thoughts for further work to be done. A fruitful direction to explore here could be the integration of the internal-external account with recent research programs on the notion of expert and expert cognition, conducted in both cognitive psychology and social epistemology (GOLDMAN 2001, ERICSON et al. 2006, SELINGER & CREASE 2006). The idea would be that experts fix concepts, and possess the correct conception. A further problem would be to isolate sets of essentially contested concept, for which neither expertise, nor a pacific coexistence of conceptions seem to be appropriate.

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