



“A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.”

Brian Massumi, Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy. – In: Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum, p. xii.

The Concept is, quite appropriately, one of the most central concepts in philosophy. While it may seem to us that concepts are the primary object of philosophical investigation, since everything intelligible can be subsumed under them as a matter of definition, the manner by which they are acquired, recognized, applied, and developed still remains, while not in the least obscure, the topic of significant fundamental debates, with a kaleidoscope of different traditions, schools of thought, and countless philosophers offering their own 'solutions' to the 'problem'. How can concepts be used both to build 'courthouses of reason' as well as be 'thrown through a window'? At first, concepts seem like necessary parts of our cognition, the pieces we use when we do what is often termed 'reason'.

However, if that's the case, how can we abandon concepts, or develop them over time? How can we acquire concepts from our experiences, or from other people? In order for us to be able to answer these questions, and explain how disparate, contradictory activities such as building courthouses of reason and window-smashing can be united under one concept, that of the Concept itself; we will need to first investigate into the nature of the Concept and how it fits into our thought in general.

Our first impression of concepts is that they exist subjectively: they are *for us* in being a *constitutive part of our rationality*. Does this mean that only concepts can be thought, or are there other necessary elements that allow for our capacity to think? First, we must admit that there necessarily must exist objects of experience which are thought: if this was not the case, then our intellect would have nothing to form judgements about, and it would therefore be useless. Furthermore, even when considering matters concerning its own structure, or simply thinking about nothing, the intellect must be stimulated by experience in order for it to come into action. All of our concepts apply solely to representations considered in general: while there are possible examples of people attempting to use concepts beyond it, the notion of an unrepresented orange chair seems necessarily impossible to represent. Therefore, we now have seemingly two essential elements to our experience: concepts and experiences, both of which are subjugated to representations. This raises the question: how do they relate to one another, and the possibility of our thinking in general? To understand the logical demands of the possibility of cognizing the world using concepts, we must take inspiration from Kant and perform a *transcendental deduction*: transcendental because it is investigating the necessary logical structure which allows for the possibility of our experiences in general, and deduction because we are investigating the *quid juris* of the matter of intelligible experience, so to speak.

The first requirement for the possibility of judging objects of experience, which as we saw previously is the primary role of concepts in our thinking, is what Kant called, quite obscurely, the *synthetic unity of apperception*. In order to understand what he meant, we merely need to break down each constituent term of this remarkable phrase. But first, we must consider the necessity of positing such a concept in the first place. Before explaining how perceptions are processed and interpreted by the intellect, Kant must first explain how they are capable of relating to each other at all. If it was not by concepts, then what other, more primary faculties ought we postulate the

existence of in order to comply with the demands of the logical form of our judgements? This is of the *transcendental apperception*, which is a fancy term for the *logical unity of the self, in which inheres all representations*.

By synthetic, Kant was referring to the act of the synthesis of our undetermined appearances, or sensations. When sensations are caused to be impressed to the mind, there must be a way by which they can be combined into one cognition, since, for example, the observation of an apple on top of an orange chair requires not only a succession of sensations but also for them to be combined into a unity which forms a singular cognition. This unity is only possible if the self which thinks these cognitions is the same throughout all representations, or else it would be possible for certain sensations to not be combined to each other at all, and it seems to us that all possible sensations we have are capable of being cognized alongside each other. For example, even if we may not end up doing so contingently, it is necessary that we are capable of judging that our manifold impressions of the red thing we are perceiving form a singular object, which is a necessity for thought. Therefore, there is a logically united self which exists across all representations and in which inheres all of the faculties of cognition, including our concepts.

However, there is another important conclusion to be drawn from the deduction of the synthetic unity of apperception. In any given cognition, we must be capable of thinking that thought as a thought itself. By this I mean that, in observing the orange chair, we must be able to, at any given moment, cognize not only the chair as an object but as an object being perceived by ourselves (not only be able to think "The chair is orange", but also be able to think "I am perceiving an orange chair"). If not, then there would be no metric by which to conclude that any given experience is ours, and our subjective experiences could possibly belong to someone else, which contradicts our own unified awareness of them. Therefore, while we may never be *explicitly aware* of ourselves as thinking that chair, there must exist as a pure *a priori* (meaning logically prior to all experience) concept of the *implicit apperception* of "I think" whenever there is a singular cognition in the mind, which acts as permanent objective self-consciousness, which is therefore necessary for a concept to be known in general.

Now that we have established on firm logical ground the necessity of the unity of the mind in general, and deduced from it the necessity of objective self-consciousness in the mind, we must now turn our attention to how we can entertain not only experiences in general, but also what role concepts specifically play in them. The only way by which this could possibly be done is by first elaborating on what faculties of the mind concepts logically depend on.

Firstly, the undetermined appearance must be somehow cognizable not *as something intelligible*, but *as something perceivable* in general. One necessary cognition for something to be sensed is its representation in space and time. While considering space and time pure concepts of the senses rather than mere logical features of the world in general is certainly controversial, unfortunately there is no time to place on firm logical ground the necessity of seeing space and time as parts of cognition applied to objects of experience rather than things in themselves in reality. It merely follows the pattern of deduction we have followed so far. Therefore, there must be a faculty by which sensations are placed in relation to one another, so that they can be related to each other not only in general as we saw in the section about the transcendental apperception, but also with the specific spatio-temporal character of our senses, so that they may come to be intelligible, since representations can only be known as specifically *temporal*, since this is a requirement for experiences to be perceivable.

However, if that is the case, then there must be some way in which what has been produced by the senses can be ordered by the mind into a series in time, and thus reproduced indirectly for our concepts. This cannot be done by the senses themselves, since their logical character is purely passive: therefore this is done in what Kant terms the "imagination". While there is more to say about this in general, we will now move on so that we can lay the groundwork as quickly as possible for our discussion of concepts exclusively, since the functioning of the imagination is not particularly important for the purposes of said discussion.

Thankfully, the next step of this synthesis involves specifically them. The recognition of any object of experience necessarily must involve its subsumption under concepts, by which it is made intelligible. It seems to be necessarily the case that anything can only be judged by concepts, and any object of experience is necessarily intelligible, since it is not only an undetermined appearance, but rather is determinate, with an observable and often measurable magnitude, qualities, properties, propensities, and so on; things that can only be judged through conceptual thinking. Therefore, by the spontaneous application of our intellect to our senses, we may come to judge facts about the world, and use concepts. While we may attempt to use concepts beyond the realm of experience, it is by its application within it, and to the *a priori* structure we have just outlined in a rudimentary fashion, that it can have any validity at all, for the logical form of our judgements which we take as given.

This gives us a relatively coherent picture of how not only concepts work in general, but also how they may be produced empirically. A person has sensations of red things: over time, the concept "Red" will be formed in and by the mind, the mental word for an empirical kind of thing which contingently happens to appear and re-appear to us. This is what we may call the *abstractive theory of concepts*.

Unfortunately, it is wrong. The reason for this is that, for a quality X to not only be cognized, but be judged as X by us, we must already possess the concept which allows us to judge it as such. For example, it is only by possessing the category of *Orange*, that we may come to cognize a chair as an *ORANGE chair*. Without the possession of the empirical concept used, there is no way for us to judge things according to that concept, which according to the abstractive theory is how concepts are supposed to be formed in the first place! Furthermore, the abstractive theory violates our precondition to all thought in general that judgement is only possible through categorical thinking: the senses cannot think themselves, and it is only through the subsumption of the senses by the intellect that we can come to judge chairs as orange and so on. If things are green by virtue of how they appear to our senses regardless of intellectual activity, then why couldn't a creature with only sensory organs but no mind come to judge propositionally about what they perceive, despite being necessarily incapable of propositional thinking, since it is fundamentally conceptual? This possibility must be avoided at all costs.

If that's the case, then how *do* we come to possess concepts? The abstractive theory itself was building off Kant's work, because in the *Transcendental Analytic* he does not clearly espouse a coherent theory of how we come to know empirical concepts if not by abstracting them from perception. As with so many things, the answer is both a lot more complex and a lot more simple than what we may imagine.

Let's start with the simple, for the sake of our collective sanity. The concept *Orange* is a mental word which is a general term applicable to particular experiences. The senses produce particularity, the concepts produce generality. Even the concept of *Thisness*, which corresponds to the mental world *This*, despite denoting particularity ("This chair is orange"), itself is general. All talk about particular experiences is therefore *mediated* by more logically fundamental and general mental words.

Why call concepts mental words? Well, because they're mental, and because they're *words*. The concept of orange we use to judge things as orange that are perceived by us seems to be the same word that our parents use to not only judge things as orange themselves but *communicate with us*. There is something about *orange, as a word*, that makes it not only objectively applicable to our subjective experiences as *subjective concepts*, but also objectively applicable to our intersubjective communication as *social concepts*. (By "objectively applicable" I mean that objective judgements may be formed from its application in both cases).

The question now inevitably arises of which one is more primordial: *subjective* or *social* concepts, or perhaps a third, unexplored kind of concept. It cannot be subjective ones, since they are either abstracted from experience, which we have shown to be false, or they are innate to the logical unity of cognition (NOT our brains, something I will hopefully elaborate on later), which is only applicable to pure concepts: despite what Plato may have said, it is not at all clear to us that the concept of *Orange* is implicitly apperceived in every possible experience and our job is to deduce what has been there all along. If this was the case, then there would be no 'courthouse of reason' to build, since it would already be built; furthermore, there would be no way to throw concepts through windows, since they are fixed from birth. That last part seems to be incoherent with what we know about concepts: they develop over time. The concept *Electron* has changed so much over the years that having to memorize all the different formulations of it made me get a B in Physics. Therefore, we must turn our attention to the possibility of social concepts being more primordial than subjective ones. But first, I must clarify that the division between subjective and social concepts is purely formal: as we saw with Orange, all subjective concepts are also social, and all social ones can become subjective. If this is not clear, then this can be proven to be the case, as well as the primordially of concepts as social formations *for any given cognition*, with one of the most influential thought experiments of recent decades in Anglophone philosophy: Wilfrid Sellars' Myth of Jones.

For the sake of brevity, and since I am retelling someone else's argument for the sake of proving this necessary point to getting to the true nature of concepts, I will tell it as briefly as I can, so rest assure it will be incomplete and only seek to serve its established purpose, rather than other ones Sellars may have meant it to achieve. The thought experiment starts with a civilization of people called Ryleans, which are exactly like us (by "us" I mean people with the same discursive capacities, and thus the same logical structure of cognition that was partially outlined earlier), except that they have no explicit concept of private experiences. By this I mean that they do not, due to a gap in their language, speak of their own sensations, or their own private thoughts, despite implicitly having their use of language determined by them: furthermore, they do not have any concept of private thoughts and experiences in others. While this may seem alien to us, it does seem logically consistent that these people may not have ever recognized, due to a contingent anomaly, the pure *a priori* concepts which govern their behaviour as "experiencers", as "cognizers", and as self-conscious agents. Which, as we established in the section on the *transcendental apperception* which may at the time have seemed awfully esoteric and unrelated to concepts, is entirely possible to occur. They are cognitively

capable of thinking "I am thinking of that chair" according to the structure of their own cognition, but they never actually do because their socially-acquired language is too limited.

Now we can introduce the person after which the Myth is named: Jones. Jones is some sort of scientist. A quite eerie one by our standards, but a revolutionary one for Rylean society. Jones notices in other people that, the way in which people acted in conversations, sometimes being silent, sometimes saying things, seemed to indicate the presence of a common conceptual substrate which allowed for people to have something to say when they open their mouths, rather than us taking the spoken, intelligible words of people as the primordial "atoms" of knowledge and understanding in general. Therefore, Jones postulated the existence of an unobservable activity which corresponds to our concept of *thinking*, which occurs inside the brain which was of course quite well known to Ryleans as it is to ourselves. This made Jones a massive scientific success in the Rylean universe, and truly there is no reason to see how Jones postulating this unobservable entity which grants the Ryleans more explanatory power with respect to human (or rather Rylean) behavior, both of themselves and of other people, and our own postulation (by whom precisely I cannot recall) of electrons as an unobservable entity which governs the behaviors of molecules, as categorically different. If you object that electrons are theoretically observable, then I must remind you that quarks are not, so the same point could be made about them.

This has shown us that it is totally coherent for us to *know* concepts *socially*, but not *subjectively*, despite constantly applying them in a *subjective manner*. Since we had previously established that concepts can only be first known socially anyways, this means that these unobservable postulates cannot be derived from private experience but rather must be derived for any given cognition socially. The only way in which we can articulate our implicit self-consciousness, as we established a necessary precondition for conceptual thinking, is if we have fluency of a language so that we may articulate it to ourselves. Therefore, *signification* is only possible, let alone intelligible, as a social activity.

Unobservable scientific postulates such as electrons and thought quite paradoxically do alter the manner by which we perceive the world, since as we established the world as experience, the logical world, can only be known through the subsumption of our sensations to our concepts. However, this is done so *analogically*: we speak of activities determined by electrons in a *different but related* sense as to how we speak of electrons themselves as theoretical scientific entities. Similarly, the concept *Orange* conceived of subjectively, thus as applying to perceived qualities of *phenomena*, is used in a *different but related sense* to how we use the concept socially. This is similar to the concept *Thought* in our conventional, private sense, versus the Jonesian, scientific sense.

This is also necessary because, since concepts are a precondition to the logical structure of cognition to be intelligible to us, this means that analyzing it through the logical order it gives us makes it impossible to analyze the *cause of concepts*, and thus their true *origin and malleability*. Yet, as we have seen, what Kant termed the *analytic of the pure understanding*, the logical analysis of the laws of the intellect and its conceptual thinking *from its own terms*, is not the most fundamental origin point for concepts, which have as their *causal precondition* a familiarity with a *public language*. Therefore, we must distinguish between the explanatory role of the logical order, derived from the logical form of judgement and acting through the analytic of pure understanding, in logically deducing how our concepts relate to objects of experience through signification; and the explanatory role of the *real order*, derived from the *social role of language and the*

*neurophysiological structure and activity of the brain* and acting through *cognitive science*, in *inductively postulating* how our concepts relate to their physical and abstract causes, through what Sellarsians often call *picturing* (although it has fallen somewhat out of fashion, not as a term but as a concept). To put it in more simple terms, instead of seeing the self-conscious mind as primordial, we are now able to see the physical brain as more primordial than self-consciousness as a precondition to it. Because even though the Myth of Jones only talks about the social role of language in producing concepts for us, the social role of language itself is dependent on innate, *physical* cognitive structures which aids our acquisition of language: or at least according to the scientific theory of Universal Grammar (it can be different kinds of science, but it's scientific theories "all the way down").

Now, we can explain how the mind produces signification, and the brain produces picturing, as well as producing the mind, which signifies the brain (simple, but also complex!). But what is picturing? Well, just as social and subjective concepts relate analogically to each other, the *real* and *logical orders* we have posited also relate to each other analogically, insofar as they both relate to concepts, but applied socially and subjectively respectively. We cannot say literally that, by a ray of light producing a chemical reaction in our retinas, which transmits a signal to our brains, that leads to certain neurons firing in a specific manner, that we are *representing a chair*. However, this activity, which we call *picturing*, is fundamentally analogical to the act of representing said chair (in fact it determines it).

Due to the fact that the real order determines what arrives at the logical, this example, while essentially correct, may be confusing. Let's take, therefore, an example of a creature whose logical order, if existent at all, is fundamentally foreclosed to us. Let's say scientists working for a government at war have built a machine that tracks the positions of lightning rays and manages to redirect them to strike the military bases of the enemy. The machine manages to do this by having immensely long magnetic sticks which, when lightning strikes, it manages to attract and repel the lightning bolt according to the machine's directions in such a way that it redirects the bolt to strategic enemy territory. (If it is not obvious by now, I have no idea how lightning works). Therefore, the machine must picture the environment, and the spatiotemporal relation of two elements in the real order of things (lightning and the machine) determines the machine's activity in relation to the lightning, according to the rules humans placed in the machine using code. Two elements in the real order may only relate *to each other as real through picturing*: the real and logical orders can only be related *in what is signified as the "same thing" in the logical order*.

Like that machine, humans, on a fundamental level, behave according to rules, even in the logical level. For example, the implicit apperception of objective self-consciousness is a logical rule of judgement and a concept which all things with the same sort of discursive abilities as we have, humans and Ryleans, must follow. Human cognition has fundamental limits, which are conceived as conceptual in nature, which thus bind us to specific rules such as that one. However, the *cause* of rule-following behaviour, which is the *essence of acting according to concepts*, whether they are implicit or explicit, in building courthouses of reasons or boldly tearing down established dogmas, is in the *real order* of physical things, where negative feedback loops determine the self-perpetuating rules which we conceive of analogically as concepts in the logical order. Therefore, we may finally say that, in their essence, *concepts are a logical reification of the real limitations of our physical cognition insofar as it is a negative feedback loop which produces discursivity*. They are *analogies* of the physical world, more precisely of neurophysiological states.

It seems to be clear how this notion of picturing can give us neurophysiological or computational explanations for conceptual thought, and thus allow us to build new, scientific, courthouses of reason according to the autonomous activity of science itself, by allowing us to prescribe normative demands for our use of reason conceived not qua itself but as being subject to higher principles of the activity of the material world and the social foundations for the concepts themselves. Our rational courthouses can only be built if the importance of *intersubjective responsibility* in discourse and *neurophysiological health* in rationality is addressed alongside what has been considered the logical rules of both, which is formal logic.

However, it is *not* quite clear yet how we can throw concept-bricks through windows. Thankfully, the answer to that question is actually quite simple: placing scientific results above "common sense" in every instance in which doing so is justifiable. Through the development of language, we develop convenient but ultimately quite crude ways of discussing events. Even when discussing fundamentally the same phenomenon, identifying the correct cause, even if it is unobservable, does change the way we interpret it, as this is the job of the concepts we possess to do. For example, if you asked a professional chemist and a 4 year old child to perceive the same chemical reaction, the possession of concepts relevant to the behaviour of molecules, rules of science and so on will make the chemist experience the events in a radically different fashion to the 4 year old. Therefore, whether we speak of depression as an ailment which comes from bad humours or the lack of serotonin in the brain, does affect the manner by which we interpret the behaviour of depressed people, before even considering treatment. The replacement of inaccurate terminology or indefensible postulates when considering empirical phenomenon is a normative imperative because we do not simply abstract scientific theories from experience in a pure state of neutrality, but rather theoretical constructs are inbuilt into our capacity of interpret the world, even beyond the technical world of electrons and thought. For example, the way in which people interpret the scientific relationship between the concepts of sex and gender will inevitably impact their opinions on the rights of transgender people. Picking and choosing the right scientific concepts is of great ethical importance.

Concepts are indeed bricks, because they are heavy to us, as well as both fundamentally constructive and destructive. When you consider the ontological status of something that determines how the world is even intelligible to you, there is great ethical responsibility which springs from the realization of just how malleable our discursive capacities really are on a physical level. Despite having placed the capacity for reason of humans on necessary logical ground, it is obvious to anyone living in the 21st century that humans do act irrationally a good part of the time, and these are not aberrations but mere facts of the material world which determine the rules we must, whether we recognize them or not, follow in our thought. Concepts therefore act as the symbolic limits of our world. The limiting or misuse of language does have extensive practical effects in how people behave, especially intersubjectively when interacting with each other. All this means that, for us to be able to build courthouses of reason, we must throw conceptual bricks through windows, challenge established dogmas, be creative with our thought but most of all be responsible with how we apply our thinking so that we always conform to the demands that concepts implicitly make of themselves. Furthermore, an important ethical principle that runs through the work of both Kant and Sellars is that *knowing how* is fundamentally more important than *knowing that*. Knowing *how* people think, and categorizing them according to that, is more important than merely descriptively categorizing all the way in which they tend to think in a surface-level Peripatetic manner. It is not just about building courthouses and destroying windows, but about knowing how to build just courthouses and knowing

how to destroy the windows of injustice. This is, in my opinion, the most important lesson to take from this preliminary and incomplete investigation into the nature of concepts.

CLPEDUHH 19