

Abstract

This thesis aims to develop a psychologically plausible account of concepts by integrating key insights from philosophy (on the metaphysical basis for concept possession) and psychology (on the mechanisms underlying concept acquisition).

I adopt an approach known as informational atomism, developed by Jerry Fodor. Informational atomism is the conjunction of two theses: (i) *informational semantics*, according to which conceptual content is constituted exhaustively by nomological mind–world relations; and (ii) *conceptual atomism*, according to which (lexical) concepts have no internal structure.

I argue that informational semantics needs to be supplemented by allowing content-constitutive rules of inference (“meaning postulates”). This is because the content of one important class of concepts, the logical terms, is not plausibly informational. And since, it is argued, no principled distinction can be drawn between logical concepts and the rest, the problem that this raises is a general one. An immediate difficulty is that Quine’s classic arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction suggest that there can be no principled basis for distinguishing content-constitutive rules from the rest. I show that this concern can be overcome by taking a psychological approach: there is a fact of the matter as to whether or not a particular inference is governed by a mentally-represented inference rule, albeit one that analytic philosophy does not have the resources to determine.

I then consider the implications of this approach for concept acquisition. One mechanism underlying concept acquisition is the development of perceptual detectors for the objects that we encounter. I investigate how this might work, by drawing on recent ideas in ethology on ‘learning instincts’, and recent insights into the neurological basis for perceptual learning. What emerges is a view of concept acquisition as involving a complex interplay between innate constraints and environmental input. This supports Fodor’s recent move away from radical concept nativism: concept acquisition requires innate mechanisms, but does not require that concepts themselves be innate.