

... ON THE INTERFACE BETWEEN MINDS
AND CONCEPTS

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VIEWS ABOUT THE RELATIONS
OF MINDS TO CONCEPTS:

Three main points of view concerning the relations of minds to concepts are recounted in the history of philosophy. Platonism, the earliest, holds that concepts are entirely independent of minds: concepts inhabit a non-spatio-temporal realm of their own, whereas minds pertain to people, who in turn are in the actual realm, subject to growth and decay. Concepts were only dimly and imperfectly apprehended by particular minds, as shadows of things are distortedly reflected on the walls of cave.¹ Aristoteles, more interested in empirical data than his renowned master, initiated the approach known as conceptualism. He denied the ontic independence of concepts from the actual realm, arguing instead that they were only mentally hypothesised by minds through observing the similarities of actual, transient objects. An in-between position, widely endorsed afterward, grants the ontic independence of the conceptual realm from the actual one, but urges that concepts are accessed by minds due to observing the similarities of actual objects that are diverse manifestations of the same concepts. This construal, merging ontological Platonism with an epistemological version of conceptualism, will be familiar to contemporary readers of Meinong and Frege.

Latest to appear was Nominalism, the view that concepts were only meanings of linguistic expressions, forged by fiat of some community of language users using expressions to convey the meanings in question. Thus concepts were construed as thoroughly linguistic in nature, forged by communal, if not individual, effort. William of Ockham and Roger of Sherwood, pioneers of this position, lived during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the fore-Renaissance, when mathematically defined terms, quite remote from sensible promptings, became current in the sciences, rendering conceptualism obsolete.² The approach of Islamic-Spanish philosophers who criticised Aristotelian conceptualism for its inferiority to Platonism in explaining ethical, aesthetic and holy concepts, credibly influenced nominalists more than admitted. Nothing,

apparently, is entirely new: contemporary readers will recognise more than shades of inspiration between classical nominalism and Wittgenstein's "look for the use, not the meaning" dictum.³ This paper advances the suggestion that, although concepts are initially mentally accessed as meanings of expressions, they outgrow their linguistic garb once in circulation, attaining a status far longer lived than expressions of particular languages, not to say ever lasting. Ways that concepts are related to experience, construed very widely as any deliverances of particular consciousnesses, are also taken up in accordance with the spirit, if not the word, of conceptualism. Individual consciousnesses turn their private deliverances to public meanings by means of encoding them in language. Thus a construal of the route from private contents to maximally objective concepts is sketched in outline. Concepts attain objective status like music, art or literature does: begotten in private consciousnesses, born into public awareness through modes of expressive channels, they take a step further in objectivity by attaining independence from any particular mode of expression as well. It may well have been this maximal objectivity that prompted the Platonic stipulation of a separate realm.

Medieval thought on concepts was succeeded by Port Royal Logic, introducing an important distinction: the intension of a given concept was construed as the totality of concepts that jointly constituted its definition, while its extension was the collection of objects it applied to. This rather naïve understanding of the collection, past, present or future, instances of a concept was later imported into mathematics as the notion of a set.⁴ Since mathematical objects are taken to be non-temporal, qualms concerning difficulties related to the temporal status of set members do not arise in this case. Such difficulties do arise for sets of actual entities, though: do deceased members of the set of humans still count as genuine members? What is the number of members of the set of dodo birds? How are such questions to be answered? So, the notion of the extension of concepts needs to be augmented with some sort of temporal specification, for the general case.

A putative logical relation between intensions and extensions was the inverse principle: more concepts in the intension made for fewer instances in the extension: there are credibly fewer prime natural numbers than simply natural numbers, although there are infinitely many of either. This 'principle' fails for concepts already included in any definition of a parent concept: there are as many pine trees as there are coniferous pine trees, since all pine trees are coniferous. Failure of the rule of inverse extension indicates sameness of the concepts involved, despite difference of intension.

Frege's notion of the sense and reference⁵ of concepts was a transparent successor of the intension-extension construal, better heeding the role of