

# Concept Possession

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I have proposed the following analysis of what it is for an *individual*  $x$  to possess a concept determinately, to understand it:

$x$  determinately possesses a given concept iff<sub>def</sub>  $x$  determinately understands some proposition which has that concept as a conceptual content.

This analysis invokes the notion of determinately understanding a *proposition*. To understand a proposition determinately is to understand it in a certain *mode* —namely, determinately. The hard problem is to say what distinguishes this mode from other natural modes of understanding. My strategy for answering this question is to quantify over natural modes of understanding, including determinateness itself (much as in Ramsified functional definitions of mental properties one quantifies over properties, including the mental properties being defined). The goal in this setting is to isolate general properties which determinateness has and which other natural modes of understanding lack. My proposal is the following:

determinateness = the mode  $m$  of understanding with the following properties:

- (a) correctness

- (b.i) categorial completeness
- (b.ii) noncategorial completeness.

(a) A mode  $m$  has the correctness property iff, necessarily, for all individuals  $x$  and all propositions  $p$  which  $x$  understands in mode  $m$ ,  $p$  is true *if* it is possible for  $x$  (or someone initially in qualitatively the same sort of epistemic situation as  $x$ ) to settle with *a priori* stability that  $p$  is true, all the while understanding  $p$  in mode  $m$ . (b.i) A mode  $m$  has the categorial completeness property iff, necessarily, for all individuals  $x$  and all true (positive or negative) property identities  $p$  which  $x$  understands in mode  $m$ , it is possible for  $x$  (or someone initially in qualitatively the same sort of epistemic situation) to settle with *a priori* stability that there is some true twin-earth style counterpart of  $p$ , all the while understanding  $p$  in mode  $m$ . (b.ii) A mode  $m$  has the noncategorial completeness property iff, necessarily, for all individuals  $x$  and all true propositions  $p$  which  $x$  understands in mode  $m$  and which  $x$  could believe, it is possible for  $x$  to believe  $p$  while still understanding it in mode  $m$ .<sup>1</sup>

Regarding this analysis, Kim says, "What I find intuitive and plausible in Bealer's approach is something like this: a subject's cognitive responses to concept identities involving  $C$  are determinative of that subject's possession of  $C$ " (p. 309). The question is whether the proposed analysis works out in its details. Now an analysis may be faulted (A) because it is subject to counterexamples or (B) because it is flawed methodologically. I will divide my comments with this division in mind.

(A) *Candidate Counterexamples*. To be successful, a counterexample would need to show that determinateness does not have one or more of the three indicated properties (this would show that the analysis does not provide a necessary condition), or it would need to show that there are modes of understanding other than determinateness which have the three properties (this would show that the analysis does not provide a sufficient condition).

Many commentators fail to understand that the three properties — correctness, categorial completeness, noncategorial completeness — are properties of determinateness, a general mode  $m$  of understanding. They instead treat them as properties of a particular subject's understanding of a particular concept  $C$ . This gives rise to

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<sup>1</sup>I will suppress the question of whether there are species of determinateness which also have the three properties. If there are, determinateness is then to be identified with the genus of natural modes of understanding which have the properties.

the first sort of candidate counterexample, which questions whether the categorial completeness property is a necessary condition. Kim, for example, says, "In order to possess the concept  $C$  the subject must, on Bealer's account, have intuitions about the identity  $C = A$ , for each and every concept  $A$ " (p. 308). (See also Orlando p. 329, note 5.) But, of course, subjects can determinately possess a concept  $C$  without having intuitions concerning its relation to every concept  $A$ . This counterexample arises from a simple scope error. What the analysis implies is something far, far weaker —namely, that for every  $A$ , if  $x$  already determinately understands the whole proposition that  $C = A$ , then it would be possible for  $x$  (or someone initially in qualitatively the same sort of epistemic situation) to settle *a priori* whether (some twin-earth counterpart of) the proposition that  $C = A$  is true. (It is understood that, to do this,  $x$ 's cognitive conditions —intelligence, attentiveness, etc.— might need to improve or  $x$ 's conceptual repertory might need to be enlarged.)

Next, a candidate counterexample to the sufficiency condition. David Sosa suggests (p. 321) that, for some mode  $m$  which has the three properties, there might be someone —e.g., Frank Jackson's Mary— who understands a phenomenal concept in mode  $m$  but who does not have a "full understanding" of the concept. For his counterexample Sosa seems to have in mind that  $m =$  determinate-in-all respects-except-phenomological-recognitional-abilities. To see that this  $m$  is not a counterexample to the sufficiency condition, let  $p$  be the following proposition: the property of being what it is like to experience red = the property of being like *this* (where *this* is what it is like to experience red). Then, as long as Mary continues to understand  $p$  in this indicated mode  $m$ , it is not possible that she settles  $p$  and necessarily always settles it the same way (as is required by the definition of *a priori* stability). Therefore,  $m$  lacks categorial completeness and so is not a counterexample.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Incidentally, not only does  $m$  fail to satisfy (b.i), but for much the same reason it also appears not to satisfy (b.ii).

Considerations like those in the text also show that we do not have a counterexample if  $m =$  incomplete understanding. For a third type of candidate counterexample to the sufficiency condition, suppose that Mary *misunderstands* what it is like to experience red, wrongly taking experiences of red to be like experiences of blue. In this case the associated modes of understanding  $m$  would not, however, be genuine counterexamples, for in her efforts to settle  $p$  *a priori* Mary would inevitably arrive at some *incorrect* answers, thereby showing that  $m$  does not satisfy the correctness condition.

As for Sosa's basketball example, basketball coaches presumably know *what* a fast break is, and they might even know what it would be *like* to execute one.

Finally, another candidate counterexample to the necessity condition. The claim is that someone  $x$  might determinately understand a property identity  $p$  (e.g., that  $C = A$ ) even though it is not possible for  $x$  (or someone in qualitatively the same sort of epistemic situation) to settle whether there is a true twin-earth counterpart of  $p$ . Why? Because  $x$  might not have intuitions leading to answer this question. (See Kim, pp. 308-309; Sosa, pp. 318-320; Orlando, p. 325 note 1.) But this fails to appreciate the fact that, when I say that it should be possible for  $x$  (or surrogate of  $x$ ) to settle this question correctly, the intention is that  $x$  (or surrogate of  $x$ ) may have cognitive conditions of any quality, no matter how high the level as long as it is metaphysically possible. In particular, the *intelligence* level may be as high as would be relevant as long as it is metaphysically possible. Kim and Orlando, however, entertain the idea that the subject might continue to lack intuitions. But when one's intelligence increases, so does the scope of one's intuitions. If, no matter how great one's intelligence were, one still lacked intuitions, the right thing to say is that the subject does not determinately possess the relevant concepts. What else could account for the fact that the subject is drawing a blank? What is the relevant difference between the envisaged example and the examples (the Platonist logician, etc.) considered in the paper? Absent an answer, we would have an unexplained mystery. Why believe in such a thing?

(B) *Methodological Questions*. The preceding points about intuition leads naturally to a methodological question. Kim (pp. 308-309), Sosa (pp. 318-320), and Orlando (p. 325) each question whether the analysis of concept possession should invoke both intuition and belief—rather than just belief.<sup>3</sup> Three points are in order. First, presumably advocates of a purely belief-based analysis would want to take advantage of the various “labor-saving devices” developed for the proposed intuition-*cum*-belief analysis; without them, a belief-based analysis would be open to easy counterexamples. Second, the proposed analysis is evidently free of counterexamples. If there is also a counterexample-free analysis based solely on belief, that

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But, despite this, many coaches (unlike a player such as Michael Jordan) are unable to execute fast breaks because they are too uncoordinated. Are such coaches *conceptually* deficient? It hardly seems so.

<sup>3</sup>Kim also suggests that intuitions can in some cases be identified with “a strong initial inclination to believe”. For a critique of this sort of reductive treatment of intuitions, see my “*A Priori Knowledge: Replies to Lycan and Sosa*”, *Philosophical Studies* 81, 1996, pp. 163-174; and “Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy”, in *Intuition*, Michael DePaul and William Ramsey (eds.), Rowman and Littlefield, in press.

would not fault the proposed analysis. Nothing in principle prevents a notion from having two correct (and, hence, necessarily equivalent) analyses. Third, a reason to prefer the proposed analysis over a purely belief-based analysis is that it reflects the underlying psychological and epistemological reality, namely, that for a great many relevant cases intuition guides rational belief formation, not the other way around. In such cases, prior to considering the question at issue a person often has no beliefs one way or the other about it. Upon considering the question, however, the person forthwith has an intuition, and on that basis forms the associated belief.<sup>4</sup> If the envisaged purely belief-based analysis turned out to be correct, the explanation would be that, as one's cognitive conditions improve and one's conceptual repertory increases, one's beliefs on *a priori* matters are increasingly constrained by one's *a priori* intuitions. The reason, of course, is that intuitions are *evidence*, and as one's cognitive conditions improve, belief formation is ever-more rational and, accordingly, is ever-more under the control of the evidence.

The last point leads to a general point about explanatory order. In other papers,<sup>5</sup> I have given independent arguments in support of the thesis that intuitions are evidence and that the only acceptable explanation of this fact is provided by a kind of reliabilism: intuitions are evidence because, in suitably good cognitive conditions, they have an appropriate tie to the truth. So far so good, but this account gives rise to the question of *why* intuitions should have such a tie to the truth.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of concept possession (which is based on a variety of examples such as the Platonist logician example) provides the answer: it is constitutive of determinate concept possession that

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<sup>4</sup>Here is an example. Consider average twenty-year old college students with no background in logic, linguistics, or philosophy. *At least according to our standard belief ascription practices*, we would not say that they right now believe that there are two readings of 'Necessarily, the number of planets is greater than seven', one on which it is false and one on which it is true (assuming that there are nine planets). Nor would we say that they have the contrary belief. They have no belief one way or the other regarding this question. When they come to your lecture on this topic, they are going to acquire *new* beliefs. This at least is what our standard belief ascription practice dictates. Now suppose we confront the students with the above question. After some reflection, the good students come to see both readings; they have the intuitions. And therewith, not before, they come to have the associated beliefs.

<sup>5</sup>"*A Priori* Knowledge and the Scope of Philosophy", *Philosophical Studies* 81, 1996, pp. 121-142. "On the Possibility of Philosophical Knowledge", *Philosophical Perspectives* 10, 1996, pp. 1-34.

<sup>6</sup>Orlando (p. 324) raises this question but without knowing the larger explanatory structure developed in these other papers.

a person's intuitions should have the indicated sort of a tie to the truth; if there were not such a tie to the truth, the right thing to say is that the person simply fails to understand one of the concepts. Evidently, the only alternative explanation of intuition's truth-tie is one which (as in Gödel's theory of mathematical intuition<sup>7</sup>) identifies intuition with a kind of non-sensory perception. Many people find this explanation mysterious; but, even setting that worry aside, our explanation in terms of concept possession is superior just on grounds of simplicity.

The next methodological issue concerns a doubt that a general account of concept possession is possible. (Sosa, p. 321; Orlando, p. 330 raise this doubt.) But given that we do have a general notion of concept possession, it would be mysterious indeed if there were no account of what it amounts to, if it were an unexplainable primitive. Of course, the best response to the doubt is simply to produce an account. If it is free of defects, the doubt is erased.

The final methodological point concerns the matter of realism. I have said that the proposed analysis presupposes realism about concepts, properties, and propositions; realism about the modalities; and realism about the propositional attitudes and modes of possessing (or understanding) concepts and propositions. Kim (pp. 304-305) questions what I mean when I say this and whether it is a wise strategy. For our immediate purposes, a minimalist understanding suffices: I may be taken to mean that, in an analysis, use may be made of our ordinary modal idioms and of variables whose intended range of values include the indicated entities. I am convinced that no analysis of concept possession is feasible unless one takes advantage of such a framework; one must only look at the literature to see that efforts based on weaker resources have failed.

Of course, someone might approve the use of the indicated framework for the purpose of formulating an analysis but at the same time attempt some kind of nonrealist interpretation of it. (See Kim p. 307.) I need not take a stand on this as long as truth values of statements made in the framework would still conform to our intuitive assessments. This is all that is needed for the proposed analysis of concept possession to succeed.

Can something stronger be said in favor of realism? Well, there are convincing intuitive arguments that various positive existential

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<sup>7</sup>Kurt Gödel, "What Is Cantor's Continuum Problem?", *Collected Works*, vol. II, Solomon Feferman et al. (eds.), New York: Oxford, 1990, pp. 254-270; "Some Basic Theorems on the Foundations of Mathematics and Their Implications", *Collected Works*, vol. III, 1995, pp. 304-323.

statements made in the above framework are true—for example, statements that concepts, properties, and propositions exist.<sup>8</sup> But by themselves such arguments do not rule out all nonrealist interpretations. (Something additional is needed; see below.) To see why such intuitive arguments do not by themselves suffice, let us turn to Tomberlin's comments on possibilism.

Tomberlin offers intuitive arguments that various positive existential statements made in a possibilist framework are true—for example, statements that there exist nonactual possibilities. (Of course, whether or not his arguments are sound does not affect the correctness of the proposed analysis of concept possession; that is an independent question.) The point I want to make is this. There is a way in which one can accept the possibilist framework without being a realist about nonactual possibilities, without admitting such entities into one's philosophical ontology. But the corresponding point does not hold for concepts, properties, and propositions. Let me explain.

The main idea is that in one's philosophical ontology *singular identity concepts* may fulfill theoretical functions similar to those of nonactual possibilities. ( $x$  is a singular identity concept iff it is possible for there to exist something  $y$  such that  $x =$  the concept of being identical to  $y$ .) Although many of these concepts do not have instances, they *could*; and, if they were to have instances, they would serve to individuate those instances. At the same time, singular identity concepts—including those which do not have instances—are all actual, thus permitting one's philosophical ontology to be fully actualist. Now consider a superficially possibilist language, that is, a language with sentences such as 'There is a possible move which I could have made but did not'. Suppose the above actualist philosophical ontology is enriched with a new logical operation corresponding to 'there is a possible'. In this setting, one could then identify the propositions which are meant by superficially possibilist sentences; and, by using singular identity concepts, one could give general truth conditions for these propositions, all the while invoking only actual objects in the account. Suppose that, knowing of this prospect, we decided to make positive assertions in the superficially possibilist language. Would we thereby be making ontological commitment to things beyond the actual? Would our philosophical ontology no longer be actualist? It hardly seems so.

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<sup>8</sup>See, for example, my "Universals", *The Journal of Philosophy* 90, 1993, pp. 5-32, and my "Universals and Properties", *Contemporary Readings in the Foundations of Metaphysics*, S. Laurence and C. Macdonald (eds.), Basil Blackwell, 1998.

Can the tables be turned on our preferred actualist framework of concepts and propositions? No, for two transcendental reasons. First, an analogous nonrealist treatment of the language of concepts and propositions cannot be given, for this style of treatment requires the framework of concepts and propositions for its very implementation. Second, there is a fundamental epistemological difference between the framework of concepts and propositions and the framework of nonactual possibilities. The former is required for a satisfactory general account of what justified belief is, so denying these entities pushes us into an epistemically self-defeating situation. Such a framework has, therefore, the highest epistemic credentials a philosophical ontology can have. Not so for the conceptual framework of nonactual possibilities: it is not required for an account of what justified belief is; abandoning it does not lead to epistemic self-defeat.