Moral Responsibility for Concepts, Continued: Concepts as Abstract Objects

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Abstract: In Fredericks (2018b), I argued that we can be morally responsible for our concepts if they are mental representations. Here I make a complementary argument for the claim that even if concepts are abstract objects, we can be morally responsible for coming to grasp and for thinking (or not thinking) in terms of them. As before, I take for granted Angela Smith’s (2005) rational relations account of moral responsibility, though I think the same conclusion follows from various other accounts. My strategy is to focus on the relations that can obtain between concepts (understood as abstract objects) and morally responsible agents. I conclude by discussing some of the reasons why my arguments matter, which have to do with consequential choices between conceptual options, purposefully seeking out concepts that are new to us, and moral education.

Keywords: abstract objects, Angela Smith, concepts, moral responsibility

1. Introduction

In Fredericks (2018b), I argued that we can and should extend Angela Smith’s (2005) rational relations account of moral responsibility to encompass not just responsibility for actions and attitudes (insofar as and because they can reflect agents’ evaluative judgments), but also responsibility for the concepts that agents possess and use (or do not use), since those concepts can also reflect agents’ evaluative judgments. In doing so, I assumed that concepts are mental representations, which made my radical proposal somewhat easier to swallow than it would otherwise be. For, if concepts are mental representations, then they, like the actions and attitudes that Smith discusses, are products of evaluative mental *activity*.

However, the assumption that concepts are mental representations is not universally accepted; there are other plausible accounts of concepts’ ontological status. The most plausible and popular alternative account says that concepts are abstract objects; this is sometimes called the semantic view (see Margolis and Laurence 2007, Zalta 2001, and Peacocke 1992).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Here I argue that we can be morally responsible for concepts even if they are abstract objects, not mental representations. I begin by assuming Smith’s rational relations account of moral responsibility, as previously (although I think the same conclusion follows from various other accounts). The key is to focus on the relations that can obtain between concepts and those agents that can be morally responsible for anything whatsoever. In Section 2, I summarize relevant aspects of Smith’s and my own past work to set the stage for what follows. In Section 3.1, I argue that we can be morally responsible for grasping concepts, and in Section 3.2, I argue that we can be morally responsible for thinking (or not thinking) in terms of the concepts that we grasp. In Section 4, I clarify my position regarding moral responsibility for concepts that we grasp in early childhood and that we cease to grasp. In Section 5, I discuss why my arguments matter, including reasons having to do with consequential choices between conceptual options, purposefully seeking concepts that are new to us, and moral education.

1. Background: Moral Responsibility for Concepts, Understood as Mental Representations

In Fredericks (2018b), I argued that we are sometimes morally responsible for having and using (or not using) our concepts as we do, even though we generally do not choose to have them or have full or direct voluntary control over how we use them. In doing so, I assumed (as I shall again in this section only) that concepts are mental representations, and thus that concepts are located in our minds and created by us (2018b, pp. 1381 and 1384). This view of concepts’ ontological status is sometimes called the psychological view. In this section, I summarize my previous argument, since doing so will help clarify Smith’s rational relations account of moral responsibility and help readers distinguish the psychological and semantic views of concepts in what follows.

I extended Smith’s rational relations account of moral responsibility by arguing that the same features that Smith says make us morally responsible for some of our actions and attitudes also make us morally responsible for some of our concepts. Specifically, like our actions and attitudes, our “concepts can be: (a) conceptually and rationally connected to our evaluative judgments, (b) in principle subject to rational revision (reasons-responsive), and (c) the basis for actual and potential moral assessments of people that we have good reasons to endorse” (Fredericks, 2018b, p. 1381). Thus, having and using (or not using) concepts can render us *open* to moral appraisal when, only when, and because such things reflect our evaluative judgments.[[2]](#endnote-2) We could, for instance, be morally responsible (and possibly, but not necessarily, praiseworthy) for *not* using a concept if using it would reflect morally problematic evaluative attitudes (as it would if we used a slurring concept to derogate people on the basis of their nationality) (p. 1389).

To clarify, on this view, being morally responsible for something just is being open to moral appraisal on the basis of it, which is to say that one can legitimately be asked to justify or defend oneself regarding that thing. In affirming that an agent is morally responsible for something, it remains a further, open question whether they are also praiseworthy or blameworthy for it (or neither) (Fredericks, 2018b, p. 1381–1382).

Why think that our concepts (meaning mental representations) can be conceptually and rationally connected to our evaluative judgments? The mere possession of certain concepts is *conceptually* connected to making or being disposed to make certain evaluative judgments (Fredericks, 2018b, p. 1385). For example, merely possessing the concept CRUELTY[[3]](#endnote-3) (that is, having a mental representation of cruelty) requires that one be able to think about cruelty and be disposed to judge that cruelty is somehow bad.

Furthermore, *rational* standards govern concept usage, which involves situating concepts within more complex mental representations. For our evaluative judgments about things’ worth should (rationally) influence which concepts we do and do not use in thinking about them, and how we do so (Fredericks, 2018b, p. 1385). For instance, my evaluative judgments about the moral and social disvalue of allowing people to inherit immense wealth should (rationally) influence which concepts I bring to bear in thinking about inherited wealth. For another example, there are *rational* connections between our possession of the concept CONSENT, the evaluative judgments we make about consent, and the ways in which we do and do not use CONSENT. Specifically, people who possess CONSENT should (rationally) be disposed to judge that the Tuskegee experiments involved a lack of informed consent. Furthermore, people should (rationally) *not* use CONSENT in representing the interactions between ricocheting billiard balls, given that inanimate objects cannot consent to anything whatsoever.

Why think that our concepts can be in principle subject to rational revision? Reflection on cases shows that we can revise the content of our concepts (that is, the content of our most basic mental representations), change the contexts and ways in which we use (or do not use) them, and acquire new concepts through various more or less direct, intentional, and voluntary means, all of which are processes that involve rational activity and reflect our evaluative judgments (Fredericks, 2018b, p. 1386–1387). Consider some examples: (a) the way that one’s concept of the United States can change in response to changes in the country itself, (b) the way that, despite a relatively unchanging social reality, one’s concept of disability can change in response to arguments provided by disability theorists, and (c) the way that one can create a new concept, like MANSPLAINING, when one’s pre-existing conceptual resources are inadequate to one’s purposes.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Why think that someone’s concept possession and usage can be the basis for actual and potential moral assessments of them that we have good reasons to endorse? This is harder to show, partly because we are generally unaware of making and endorsing such assessments. However, some special cases suggest that we already do (and should) sometimes make moral assessments of people on such a basis (Fredericks, 2018b, p. 1387–1389). For example, some of us certainly make negative moral assessments of people for using slurring concepts – and endorse that practice on reflection.[[5]](#endnote-5) Of course, we only *know* that people are using such slurring concepts when they *express* the slurs,[[6]](#endnote-6) but some of us would make the same (or similar) negative assessments if we could know that slurring concepts were being used without their being expressed. And even among people who are unwilling to make negative moral assessments in those types of cases, some would make negative moral assessments of people who create new slurring concepts[[7]](#endnote-7) – which certainly involves mental activity that reflects agents’ evaluative judgments.

For these reasons, I argued that the concepts in our repertoires, when understood as mental representations, can share the same features in virtue of which we are morally responsible for some of our actions and attitudes, as described by Smith. I concluded that we can be morally responsible for the concepts that we possess and use (or do not use). However, I did not argue that we are morally responsible for *every* concept in our repertoire, nor that individuals are morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for every concept for which they are morally responsible (2018b, p. 1390–1391). With all that in mind, let us shed the assumption that concepts are mental representations and turn to a new argument for the same conclusion, one aimed at persuading those who hold a semantic view of concepts.

1. Moral Responsibility for Concepts, Understood as Abstract Objects

On the semantic view, concepts are abstract objects. They are the constituent parts of propositions, and like propositions, concepts are mind-independent and not located in any particular place. Indeed, on this view, concepts are Fregean senses that “mediate between thought and language, on the one hand, and referents, on the other” (Margolis and Laurence, 2014). Compared to the psychological view of concepts as mental representations, many people find the semantic view preferable insofar as they see it as providing superior resources for (1) making fine-grained distinctions between different concepts, since there can be multiple senses (that is, modes of presentation) for any referent and (2) explaining how a concept can be shared by different individuals, since if the concept is not spatio-temporally located within a particular individual’s psychological structures, multiple beings can stand in an identical relation to it.

However, accepting the semantic view may seem to make it harder to argue that we can be morally responsible for concepts. For if concepts are not mental representations inside of us, and not created by us through our mental activity, but rather causally inefficacious abstract objects, it is much less clear how we could possibly be morally responsible for them.

The key to overcoming this obstacle is to focus on the *relations* that can exist between morally responsible agents and concepts (understood as abstract objects). Thus, I use “moral responsibility for concepts” as shorthand for the more cumbersome, but more precise, “moral responsibility for *standing in certain (suitably mentally active) relations to* concepts.” This shorthand parallels the locutions “moral responsibility for actions” (read: “moral responsibility for *doing* actions”) and “moral responsibility for attitudes” (read: “moral responsibility for *having* attitudes”) (2018b, p. 1382).

Depending on whether you ask adherents of the semantic or psychological view, our relations to concepts may be described in terms of creating, possessing, revising, using, grasping, or what have you. These are all metaphorical descriptions that require scrutiny. I start with “grasping,” since it is a particularly prevalent metaphor among adherents of the semantic view. For on that view, “grasping” and “thinking in terms of” have more appropriate connotations than “possessing” and “using” – the latter two suggest that concepts have a kind of mind-dependence, which is denied by adherents of the semantic view.[[8]](#endnote-8) So, in Section 3.1, I discuss moral responsibility for grasping concepts, and in Section 3.2, I discuss moral responsibility for thinking in terms of concepts.

Therefore, whereas I previously assumed the psychological view of concepts and argued that we can be morally responsible for “having” and “using (or not using)” some of our concepts as we do, here I shall assume the semantic view of concepts and argue that we can be morally responsible for “grasping” and “thinking in terms of (or not thinking in terms of)” some concepts.[[9]](#endnote-9) So when taken together, these arguments show that on either of the two most plausible views about the ontological status of concepts, we can be morally responsible for standing in certain suitably mentally active relations to concepts.

3.1 Moral Responsibility for Grasping Concepts

Adherents of every plausible account of moral responsibility agree that to be capable of being morally responsible for anything at all requires that one be capable of mental activity. Which mental activities are taken to be required varies across theories, and may include desiring, willing, choosing, knowing, and/or judging. All these mental activities have propositional content (they all take “that” clauses, as in “someone *judges that* something happened”). And propositions are, on the semantic view, constituted by concepts. So, if concepts are abstract objects, then every plausible view of moral responsibility presupposes that only creatures that can grasp concepts can be morally responsible. Of course, more is needed to show that such creatures can be morally responsible *for* grasping concepts, so let us turn to that specific claim.

If concepts are abstract objects and therefore not representations in agents’ minds, and if not all concepts are grasped innately (a plausible, widely shared assumption), then for an agent to come to grasp a concept that they did not grasp innately, something would have to happen. What would that something be?

Well, whatever “grasping” means in this context, it is some sort of relation between an agent and an abstract entity. In ordinary language, “grasp” can refer to either the act of initially clutching something, or the continued holding of something. Similarly, when speaking metaphorically about our relation to concepts, grasping starts at a certain time, then persists, so we can distinguish the initiation and the continuation of the grasping relation. I focus on the initiation of the grasping relation in this section. Let us consider the options for how an agent could come to grasp a concept and make an argument by elimination.

First, the idea that it is entirely random which concepts an agent comes to grasp is a non-starter. It flies in the face of experience, since we can fairly successfully predict many of the concepts that agents will and will not grasp if we know some basic information about their age and the time, place, and cultural milieu in which they live. For instance, I am confident that virtually every currently existing, cognitively unimpaired American adult grasps the concept TAX[[10]](#endnote-10) and equally confident that no newborn babies do.

Second, since abstract objects are (or at least are widely agreed to be and often simply defined as) causally inefficacious, abstract objects cannot initiate the grasping relation. If they did, we would say that concepts grasp us, not the other way around!

To be clear, if they are causally inefficacious, abstract objects cannot be the *only* causal initiator of the grasping relation, but neither can they be a *partial* cause (in tandem with something else). Unlike agents, concepts and other abstract objects are passive, and thus not the initiators (or even partial initiators) of anything whatsoever. Since concepts have neither agency nor physicality with which to initiate new relations, they are not like people whose agency is somehow limited: for example, someone who, while incapable of becoming a solo author, can initiate the joint authorship relation and thus partially cause a book to be written. (Nevertheless, on the semantic view, a concept’s *existence* is still a necessary precondition for the initiation of the grasping relation between it and agents who grasp it.)

Third, maybe the agent comes to grasp the concept because some external but non-random cause “forces” or “pressures” them to grasp it. This has some initial plausibility, given the example above; the average American adult seems to grasp TAX because encounters with and discussions about taxes are regular parts of their lives. So, one might say that American adults’ socio-economic-cultural context pressures them to grasp TAX.

But while context (including social, economic, cultural, and natural context) is certainly part of the story about who grasps which concepts, the pressure provided by an agent’s context cannot be the whole story about how they come to grasp a concept. Because, as any teacher knows, someone can be exposed to an idea all the livelong day without grasping one or more of the relevant concepts – people can encounter the same referent over and over, can repeatedly encounter communication designed to help them grasp a certain concept, can be given all sorts of incentives to grasp that concept, and still not grasp it, unless their mind is suitably prepared and they take some initiative, however small, unconscious, and/or outside their direct, voluntary control that initiative may be.[[11]](#endnote-11) To use a metaphor that I heard from my friend and former colleague Elizabeth Scarbrough, even if teachers are waitresses of knowledge who deliver up information/food to student/customers, *the students still have to be the ones to eat it*.[[12]](#endnote-12) “Grasping” is, after all, an active verb, and I doubt that is an accident.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Consider an illustrative example. I was recently introduced to the concept SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE.[[14]](#endnote-14) I was already familiar with the idea of infrastructure: the physical aspects of the built environment that provide crucial material support for us and, especially, the economy in which we operate (including roads, bridges, water systems, electrical grids, and communications networks). But listening to an interview with the sociologist Eric Klinenberg taught me about social infrastructure: the aspects of our environment that support us specifically as social beings (including physical spaces like parks and recreation centers, train stations and bus stops, schools, medical facilities, and public libraries, as well as organizations that build relationships and communities). Social infrastructure provides sites for social interaction, and colors the forms that such interaction takes.

Klinenberg was not the first to grasp the concept SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, nor did he coin the term “social infrastructure,” which dates back to at least the 1960s.[[15]](#endnote-15) Let us call whoever first grasped that concept K0.

K0 did something amazing: they undertook mental activity whereby they grasped a concept that no one had grasped before. Social forces *alone* could not have initiated that grasping relation. Why not? Well, social pressure can take the following forms: (a) an individual or group can intentionally pressure someone to think, feel, or do something or (b) an individual or group can pressure someone to think, feel, or do something, without intentionally or knowingly doing so. Sometimes unintentional social pressure exists just in virtue of the fact that people generally are (or expect to be) socially rewarded (or at least not punished) for conforming to the shared habits of those around them.

Social forces of the intentional sort could not, by themselves, initiate the grasping relation between K0 and SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, because no one grasped that concept before K0 did. Thus, no one could intentionally, under a description that makes use of SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, pressure K0 to grasp that concept. Such intentional pressuring would require the pressuring party to grasp the concept in question; one cannot intentionally initiate a relation to something the existence of which one is unaware, just as one cannot intentionally pressure someone to read a certain book if one is unaware of its existence. Regarding SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, K0’s initially grasping it solely because of intentional social pressure would require, *per impossibile,* someone else’s already grasping it, though no one did.

Social forces of the *unintentional* sort also could not, by themselves, initiate the grasping relation between K0 and SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE. That is, no individual or group could *unintentionally* exert sufficient social pressure on K0 such that K0 would thereby come to grasp that concept without any mental activity on their part. For, as we have already seen, concepts mediate between (i) referents and (ii) thought and language. Given that no one prior to K0 grasped SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, no one was talking or writing about it. Nor was it mediating between actual social infrastructure and anyone’s thoughts. So, K0 could not *just* unthinkingly mimic someone else and thereby grasp that concept. Something else, something more was needed.

Thus, it seems that the only other option is that the agent must somehow play an active role in initiating the grasping relation between themselves and the concept in question.[[16]](#endnote-16) (Playing that active role, in turn, depends on having sufficient cognitive development, which itself depends on being suitably situated in a social context.)

Moreover, it seems that it has to be an agent’s mental activity that initiates the grasping relation between them and a concept, since it seems to be impossible for their physical activity to initiate a relation with an abstract object that is not located in any particular place.[[17]](#endnote-17)

At this point, one might still think that one can grasp new concepts without making any judgments, especially if one thinks in terms of a perceptual analogy. For one might imagine that when one first grasps a concept, it is because one suddenly cannot help but “see” certain things as falling under it. One might think that concept graspers, like observers, are passive in the face of what they grasp or observe. But therein lies the mistake. For, even if one is tempted by such a perceptual analogy, perception itself requires interpretation. So, for instance, even if a concept “carves nature at its joints,” it requires mental activity to identify those joints. (Would that grasping natural and social kind concepts were so easy that it might occur passively!) When social forces (or, for that matter, natural phenomena) present things to you, you may not be able to avoid grasping and thinking in terms of some concepts or others, but *which* concepts you do are underdetermined by what you encounter, just as scientific theories are underdetermined by observational data.[[18]](#endnote-18) Your judgments partly determine both how you perceive the world and which concepts you grasp and think in terms of.

Returning to Smith, remember that she says that we are morally responsible for things insofar as they reflect our *evaluative* judgments. The relevant evaluative judgments may be about what we consider to be objectively (dis)valuable, (in)significant, or (un)important, or they may simply be about what is relatively valuable *to us*. For example, “a person can judge that a loved one’s needs or interests are especially important to him without thinking that these needs and interests are ‘objectively’ more important than anyone else’s” (Smith, 2005, p. 245). So why think that the mental activity that initiates the grasping relation between an agent and a concept can involve *evaluative* judgments? Consider our earlier example again.

It seems that K0 would have had to grasp SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE by way of other concepts that they already grasped.[[19]](#endnote-19) For instance, K0 might have already grasped SOCIAL and INFRASTRUCTURE, and initially grasped SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE simply by judging that it makes sense to use “social” to modify “infrastructure.” That judgment about what makes sense is already evaluative.

Alternatively, K0 might have already grasped PUBLIC PARK, PUBLIC LIBRARY, and PLACE OF WORSHIP. At some point, they would have begun to notice what parks, libraries, and places of worship have in common: they are sites of social interaction that thus support our social needs (to some extent). (This would be a more bottom-up route to grasping SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE.) K0’s social environment may or may not have incentivized such mental activity.[[20]](#endnote-20) But, as Smith makes clear, what you notice (or do not) and what occurs to you (or does not) generally reflects your evaluative judgments about what is significant or important (2005, pp. 242–249). By noticing similarities between instances or types of social infrastructure, K0 revealed something about their assessment of reasons. For instance, they showed that they took themselves to have good reasons to think about the social environment, social interactions, and how they relate to human needs. This tells us something about their priorities, at least at that point in time. For instance, K0 probably did not have a maximally individualistic perspective on human flourishing.

So, K0 had to be somewhat mentally active to grasp SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE for the first time. And that mental activity involved evaluative judgments, because to be able to think about social infrastructure, one needs to implicitly judge that it makes sense to think about a range of things as being similar. One needs to implicitly judge that it is somehow accurate or useful to conceive of those things in terms of their similarities.[[21]](#endnote-21) Similarly, *my* initial grasping of SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE reflects a number of *my* evaluative judgments. We can legitimately ask ourselves and others to justify such evaluative judgments, and those judgments might reflect morally better or worse things about whoever made them.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Returning to actual Klinenberg, I found it fascinating that he explicitly frames his work in terms of our need to grasp a new concept. For instance, he says of social infrastructure that “It’s just that we don’t quite have the concept for it yet and so we haven’t recognized all the things that it can do” (Ben-Achour , 2018). Elsewhere, he says:

It’s quite literally a thing in the world that we failed to conceive and, because we failed to conceive it, we haven’t seen or recognized the possibilities for building it up. I think people believe that the social glue has come undone, and the level of polarization and divisiveness we are experiencing right now is unsustainable. Now is the crucial moment for starting to think more seriously about how we rebuild some sense of a common purpose. (Florida, 2018)

It is not an accident that Klinenberg repeatedly talks of concepts and conceiving; he implicitly recognizes the powerful social transformations that can result from a process that begins with and depends upon grasping a concept that is new to us.

Given what I know, I buy Klinenberg’s thesis that we can significantly improve the world by attending to and building up social infrastructure. Therefore, I would suggest that not only is Klinenberg morally responsible for grasping SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, but that he is also likely morally *praiseworthy* for doing so, since his grasp of that concept makes it possible for him to communicate about social infrastructure, inspiring and helping implement new (and hopefully productive) approaches to large-scale social problems.

* 1. Moral Responsibility for Thinking in Terms of Concepts

Suppose, however, that certain concepts are grasped innately. If so, it seems that we cannot be morally responsible for initiating the grasping relation to them, since we were not suitably mentally active in coming to grasp them. Is there anything left to be morally responsible for, relative to those concepts? I think so – we can be morally responsible for *thinking in terms of* concepts, whether because of the rate that we do so (or do not), or the specific instances and ways in which we do so (or do not). (I assume that thinking in terms of a concept requires grasping it, but that one can grasp a concept at a time without thinking in terms of it at that time.)

So, first, notice that once we grasp a concept, we may think in terms of it more or less often. For example, I have some grasp of both PEER and COMPETITOR, but I think in terms of PEER (or COLLEAGUE) much more often than COMPETITOR. This is partly because people in my particular social position are generally incentivized to think of those we work with as equals and collaborative partners. However, it is also partly because I personally have thought a lot about the value of competition and have made the evaluative judgments that it is morally and pragmatically better to avoid (a) structuring society to incentivize competition and (b) conceptualizing people as competitors.[[23]](#endnote-23) These things are not true of everyone – some people spend much more time in competitively structured social situations and/or endorse thinking of people as competitors. In fact, some people who are familiar with my life might think of the very same people who I think of as my peers as my competitors instead.

Second, regardless of who is correct about the moral appropriateness of regularly conceptualizing a wide range of people as one’s competitors, this is the kind of thing for which we can legitimately request justification, including moral justification. In addition to justificatory questions about the *frequency* with which people think in terms of a concept, we can also legitimately ask justificatory questions about the *contexts and ways* in which someone thinks in terms of a concept. For instance, whether it happens once or often, we might legitimately ask justificatory questions about why a parent thinks of their child in terms of the concept COMPETITOR (especially if they do so outside of the circumscribed setting of a sport or game that they both enjoy).

Third, it is legitimate to ask such justificatory questions precisely because such patterns of thought reflect our evaluative judgments. Thus, we are sometimes morally responsible for thinking in terms of the concepts that we do. Furthermore, we can be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for thinking in terms of concepts (or not), depending on whether better or worse answers to those justificatory questions are available.[[24]](#endnote-24)

For a different example, which parallels one from Section 2, I grasp certain slurring concepts. More specifically, I grasp certain concepts that often mediate between (i) white nationalists’ use of certain slurs in their thoughts, utterances, and writings, and (ii) the people of color to whom white nationalists apply those slurs. However, when I consciously entertain thoughts about people of color, I do not think in terms of those slurring concepts.[[25]](#endnote-25) I present people of color in a different mode than white nationalists do; we think in terms of different concepts. For my patterns of thinking (and language use) reflect the fact that I have made various evaluative judgments about, for instance, (a) what counts as a slurring concept, (b) the moral, epistemic, and pragmatic wrongness of thinking in terms of slurring concepts, (c) the wrongness of white nationalism, and (d) why thinking of people in terms of slurring concepts is contrary to my goals and values. It is *entirely* appropriate to ask both me and white nationalists for moral justification regarding the concepts that we use to think about people of color, especially when our practices amount to robust habits.

That said, having been raised in a society pervaded by white nationalism and white supremacist views and practices, my thinking does not always *perfectly* reflect my considered judgments about the wrongness of such things; sometimes I fall short of my own ideals in ways that I may or may not be aware of or able to fully, directly, voluntarily control. I am morally responsible for, and at least sometimes praiseworthy and blameworthy for, both my successes and failures in this department (though the specifics about whether, how, and by whom I should be praised and blamed for those things raise too many questions to address here).

Of course, as bystanders, we may not know that someone is thinking of people in terms of slurring concepts if they do not express those thoughts in ways that we can access. But if we could, and to the extent that we do, know that, we certainly could and do treat it as something for which they can be morally responsible. We could and do demand things like justification, behavioral change, redress, and so on.

I have argued that if concepts are abstract objects, and if Smith’s rational relations account of moral responsibility is correct, then we can be morally responsible for grasping and thinking (or not thinking) in terms of the concepts that we do (or do not). I previously argued for the same conclusion under the assumption that concepts are mental representations. So, regardless of whether the psychological or semantic view of concepts is correct, and regardless of whether we describe our relations to concepts in terms of possession, usage, grasping, or other metaphorical phrases, those relations can reflect our evaluative judgments, and thus are things for which we can be morally responsible. Our relations to concepts are, in fact, fundamental to our being the kind of creatures that are capable of being morally responsible for anything whatsoever.

On that note, we can now see that rejecting Smith’s account of moral responsibility need not block my conclusion. For various accounts of moral responsibility ground it in mental activity. Smith says the relevant mental activity is evaluative judging. On other accounts, desiring, choosing, or willing ground moral responsibility. We have seen that grasping and thinking in terms of concepts both require mental activity. But the relevant mental activity is not just evaluative judging, or at least not in all cases. Whether one grasps or thinks in terms of a concept is sometimes also a matter of one’s having desired, chosen, or willed to do so. (Typically, one only indirectly desires, chooses, or wills that one grasp or think in terms of a concept. So, if one rejects Smith’s account of moral responsibility and wants to argue that we are responsible for concepts more often than just occasionally, it will be most straightforward to do so via a historical or tracing account, since according to such views, one can be responsible for something that one did not *directly* desire, choose, or will, but that was the product, in some sense, of one’s previously desiring, choosing, or willing something else.) So, it seems that some other accounts of moral responsibility also support the conclusion that we can be morally responsible for concepts.

4. Clarifications in Response to Further Concerns

* 1. Concepts Grasped in Early Childhood

One potential worry about my view arises when we consider human cognitive development. It seems possible that many concepts, while not grasped innately, are first grasped when we are so young that we may not have made many (or any) evaluative judgments. To the extent that this is so, children’s concepts, attitudes, and actions cannot reflect evaluative judgments, and thus children cannot be morally responsible for those things.

My response to this worry has four parts. First, *to the extent that* young children can come to grasp and think in terms of concepts, form attitudes, and/or perform actions without making evaluative judgments, I am happy to say that they are not responsible for them.

Second, I think that throughout our lives, as we grow and learn, we make more and more evaluative judgments and continually come to grasp new concepts. So even if there is something to this worry, we can still be morally responsible for whichever concepts we initially grasp later in life, once we have made a robust number of evaluative judgments and thus have morally responsible selves.

Third, even if all concepts are initially grasped prior to making morally significant evaluative judgments and thus prior to the formation of morally responsible selves (possibly even innately), we can still be morally responsible for thinking in terms of the particular concepts that we do (or do not).

Finally, to revisit my first point from a more critical perspective, I am skeptical about the claim that children, even very young ones, are incapable of making evaluative judgments. Of course, the evaluative judgments required for a child to grasp the concepts that they do may not be particularly sophisticated or reflect anything morally significant about them. For instance, a child’s coming to grasp CANDY may only require evaluatively judging that candy tastes good, and a baby’s coming to grasp LOUD NOISE may only require evaluatively judging that it causes an unpleasant sensation (not that the baby could formulate a thought in those particular terms). I do not think that those judgments reflect anything morally significant, but they do reflect the nascent rational agency of those children.

4.2 Concepts That We Cease to Grasp

Now for a pair of questions. Can one cease to grasp a concept? Certainly – Alzheimer’s and other degenerative diseases or cognitive conditions caused by serious brain injury or trauma may result in people ceasing to grasp concepts that they previously did.

So, can we be morally responsible for ceasing to grasp a concept? In cases involving dementia, injury, or trauma, ceasing to grasp a concept does not reflect any of the agent’s evaluative judgments. It happens to them without reflecting their agency; we would not ask people to justify their ceasing to grasp a concept under those conditions. Thus, people are not morally responsible for ceasing to grasp concepts in such cases.

However, in other cases, people might be. For instance, suppose I am a student, introduced to a new concept by my teacher. I exercise my rational agency in coming to grasp it for the first time and continue to grasp it for long enough to correctly answer a question about it on the next exam. But suppose I never think in terms of that concept outside the classroom, and as time passes, I lose my grasp of it entirely. I even forget that I ever grasped it in the first place.

Under such circumstances, could my ceasing to grasp the concept reflect my evaluative judgments, and ground an appropriate moral assessment of me? Could you legitimately ask me to defend my relation (or lack thereof) to it? I think so. Of course, that does not mean that in all such cases, I would be *blameworthy* for losing my grasp of it. For example, if I lost my grasp of a calculus concept like PIECEWISE-DEFINED FUNCTION, I doubt that would reflect anything morally significant about me. It probably just means that I have not used what I learned in high school calculus for a long time; my ceasing to grasp that concept might simply reflect my evaluative judgment that understanding calculus is inessential to my current life, which is probably a morally innocuous attitude for me to have.

However, if I lost my grasp of CIVIL RIGHTS, I probably would be blameworthy for that.[[26]](#endnote-26) For it probably reflects something morally significant (and bad) about me if I have not retained my grasp of that concept. Barring degenerative disease, injury, or trauma, I could probably only lose my grasp of CIVIL RIGHTS if I have not given a thought to civil rights for many years. That would likely reflect an evaluative judgment that civil rights are relatively unimportant, which is a morally faulty position for someone in my situation. (Alternatively, if what my teacher taught me were a slurring concept, I might be praiseworthy for losing my grasp of it!)

1. Why Do These Arguments Matter?

One might worry that we cannot put my arguments to work in the real world because we do not have adequate knowledge of our own (let alone others’) relations to specific concepts to make reliable moral assessments on the basis of those relations. For now, I concede that it is difficult to know who stands in which relations to which concepts. But despite that epistemic difficulty, my arguments do have important practical implications. I will now discuss some of them that relate to consequential choices between conceptual options (Section 5.1), the purposeful search for concepts that are new to us (Section 5.2), and moral education (Section 5.3).

5.1 Consequential Choices Between Conceptual Options

If concepts are Fregean senses, then each concept presents a referent in a specific, unique mode, and different concepts can present the same referent as having different properties. For instance, the concept CLARK KENT may present the relevant referent as a journalist, whereas SUPERMAN may instead present the same thing as an alien superhero. This much is familiar from debates about the semantic view’s merits. Whether one is justified in thinking in terms of CLARK KENT or SUPERMAN is largely a matter of what descriptive information one has access to in one’s circumstances, and thus is an epistemic matter.

However, thinking in terms of one concept rather than another that presents the same referent in a different mode can also be a moral matter.[[27]](#endnote-27) I hinted at this in discussing PEER and COMPETITOR above, but consider some other cases, in which people speaking Arabic have been ejected from U.S. commercial flights.[[28]](#endnote-28) It is plausible to think that the concept POTENTIAL MUSLIM TERRORIST, instead of ARABIC-SPEAKER, may have mediated between the ejectors’ thoughts and the ejected people.[[29]](#endnote-29) Or TERRORIST CODE LANGUAGE, instead of ARABIC, may have mediated between the thoughts of those who supported ejection and the sounds of spoken Arabic. If so, both grasping those concepts and thinking in terms of them in those specific ways reflect morally (not just epistemically) significant things about the ejectors’ (and their supporters’) evaluative judgments. We can legitimately ask people justificatory questions about the concepts they were thinking in terms of when discriminatorily interfering with the travel plans of Arabic-speaking people. So, the ejectors’ (and their supporters’) relations to those concepts are things for which they can be morally responsible.

Granted, moral assessments of people on the basis of their actions may generally be more important for advancing our goals than moral assessments grounded in their relations to concepts. This may be especially so in ordinary, short-term, one-on-one or small group contexts. However, since our moral responsibility for concepts is separable from our moral responsibility for actions and attitudes, the former sometimes demand a different or additional response than the latter.[[30]](#endnote-30) For example, a society in which many people regularly think in terms of a slurring concept, *even if* they do not currently *act* in discriminatory ways, is more likely to institute discriminatory policies than an otherwise similar society in which people do not think in terms of that slurring concept. So, we have reason to make different moral assessments of the people in the two societies. Therefore, thinking and communicating about moral responsibility for concepts can help us more accurately determine what exactly is blame- (or praise-) worthy in concrete cases and then hone our moral responses to those cases.

5.2 Purposefully Seeking Concepts that Are New to Us

Second, if concepts are abstract objects, they exist independently of us. They are “out there,” waiting to be grasped. Of course, we are much more likely to grasp them if we actively seek them out. So, if we want to improve our ways of being in the world, we should actively look for concepts that can help us do that.

Most people’s thoughts about the world have mostly been mediated by whatever concepts were “closest to hand”: those concepts in terms of which the people nearest and dearest to them were thinking, speaking, and writing. We should not *assume* that that is good enough. For concepts are resources (Haslanger, 2012, p. 23). Regarding other types of resources, just relying on whichever ones are within reach is often a bad approach – we often do and should actively seek out new types of resources, new suppliers of resources, and new uses for familiar, abundant resources. We should do more of this when it comes to conceptual resources. If we want to address big problems, like the climate crisis, corruption, and white nationalism, we should be asking whether the concepts that we grasp and think in terms of now are helping or hindering our pursuit of those goals (Haslanger, 2014, pp. 16–37). And we, both individually and collectively, need to figure out how to discover more of the helpful ones and how to jettison the others.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Social forces will sometimes obstruct these processes, for they generally incentivize sticking with the status quo, especially for those situated in dominant social positions. So, sometimes social pressure encourages us *not* to think about certain things, not to grasp certain new concepts.[[32]](#endnote-32) Consider GAY PRIDE, EVOLUTION, RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE, CLITORIS, SITUATED KNOWER, MARITAL RAPE, and ANTHROPOGENIC CLIMATE CHANGE, all of which, in various times and places, people have been actively (though usually implicitly) encouraged *not* to grasp.

In an era of high political and social polarization, in which people dispute basic descriptive facts (not to mention their disagreement about the values that should guide us), we need more than just true beliefs and morally appropriate actions to cope well with that polarization. Sometimes it seems that we cannot reach agreement about what the truth is, or cannot successfully cooperate, because we are thinking in terms of fundamentally different concepts—or maybe because we are all thinking in terms of the same concepts, but they are not conducive to our various shared purposes. Sometimes it seems that we fail to act as we morally should because we lack access to the conceptual resources necessary to understand moral demands or to successfully strategize about how to achieve moral ends. We cannot expect to make progress on these problems unless we are able to draw on appropriate conceptual resources. I assume that we want to make such progress and hope that recognizing ourselves and others as morally responsible for concepts could motivate us to seek out the concepts that would help us do so. While this is a very long game, that does not negate its value.

5.3 Moral Education

Finally, my arguments matter for how we think about and implement moral education: both our own continuing moral education and the formative moral education that we provide to children.

Moral education should aim to develop not just our understanding of moral requirements, but also of vices and virtues like cruelty, generosity, and so on. And while we may not be morally obligated to think in terms of particular concepts (or not), it can be cruel or generous (or otherwise vicious or virtuous) to think in terms of some concepts rather than others. This is consistent with how Aristotle characterized virtuous people in terms of their actions, feelings, *and thoughts*. But whether we are talking about thoughts, feelings, or actions, virtue does not happen by accident. It must be grounded in understanding; virtuous people habitually do virtuous things because they *understand why* doing them is virtuous in those circumstances. So, an adequate moral education teaches people *which* concepts a virtuous person would grasp and think in terms of, *how* they would do so, and *why*. This requires good role models to emulate, opportunities to practice good habits of thought (and expression), and critical reflection about and discussion of when and why some concepts are morally better than others.

Many parents and teachers already make thoughtful choices about how and what to teach children about “bad words.” We should be so attentive regarding many “mundane” concepts as well, since concepts often carry normative baggage that is easily overlooked (as we saw with PEER and COMPETITOR in Section 3.2). People who think carefully about the concepts that they encourage (and discourage) others to grasp and to think (or not think) in terms of have a better chance of supporting appropriate values and habits. If we attend to the concepts that children grasp and those they do (and do not) think in terms of (by attending to, among other things, the words they use), we are more likely to understand whether our efforts regarding moral education are working or not, and to be able to successfully adjust our educative efforts when necessary.

Among other things, in this paper I have attempted to lay the groundwork for and steer us toward such improvements of our practices regarding moral education. Starting from Smith’s rational relations account of moral responsibility, I have argued that, if concepts are abstract objects, we can be morally responsible for coming to grasp and for thinking (or not thinking) in terms of them. Since I previously reached the same conclusion by assuming that concepts are mental representations, my arguments, taken together, show that we can be morally responsible for concepts on both of the most plausible views about concepts’ ontological status. I have also discussed some of the reasons why my arguments matter, reasons having to do with consequential choices between conceptual options, purposefully seeking concepts that are new to us, and moral education.

Debates about what concepts are, and about our relations to them, are often thought to be (or portrayed as) simply matters of descriptive theory, isolated from ethical and practical concerns, but my arguments show otherwise.[[33]](#endnote-33) Our mentally active relations to concepts are central to our lives as moral creatures; those relations reflect morally significant activities that partially constitute us as who we are. Therefore, ethicists should do more to engage with and explore the consequences of those ongoing debates about concepts.[[34]](#endnote-34)

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1. While these are not the only two views regarding concepts’ ontological status, they are the most popular. For another alternative, the ability view, see Kenny (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Smith does not say much about what such “reflecting” amounts to; many scholars use metaphorical language, though not always the same metaphors, to capture the relation between morally responsible agents’ selves and that for which they are responsible. See Sripada (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. By convention, using small caps designates a concept. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. While I did not emphasize this before, the third type of case supports the claim that we can be morally responsible for not just having and using (or not using) concepts, but also for *creating* them (which, if concepts are mental representations, we all do). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Not all accounts of slurs fit equally well with what I said previously and will say later about them. For a range of views, see a semantic account in Hom (2008), a pragmatic account in Bolinger (2015), a deflationary account in Anderson and Lepore (2013), a perspectival account in Camp (2013), and a ventriloquistic account in Nunberg (2018). I shall not defend a particular account of slurs; however, even if my assumptions about slurs are incorrect, cases not involving slurs can serve the same argumentative purpose – they simply require more discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. While hate speech might come to mind here, moral responsibility for concepts is separable from legal policies and practices regarding hate speech, so I leave discussion of any connection between them for another time (and probably another author). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Jeshion (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Whether I am grasping or thinking in terms of a concept, I have an intentional mental state (one that is about something). Thus, such a mental state meets the necessary condition for being an object of moral responsibility spelled out in Smith (2005, p. 257). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Note the limited scope of “not,” which operates on “using” and “thinking in terms of” but not on “having” or “grasping.” Maybe we can be morally responsible for *not having* or *not grasping* concepts, but showing that would require further argument. However, see Section 5.2 for some related pragmatic considerations. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Though if grasping admits of degrees, as it probably does, then most people are unlikely to grasp it in a maximal way. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Moreover, sometimes, despite being suitably prepared and taking initiative, one still fails to grasp a concept. This is not an indictment, just an observation about how human minds are limited, and how not all aspects of all of our mental activities are under our direct, voluntary control. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I feel compelled to note that Elizabeth and I reject the waitress of knowledge model of education. For it portrays students as more passive than they are or should be by focusing attention on the teacher/server (who is portrayed in gendered terms that deserve critical scrutiny). It also assumes that students are well-positioned to “order” (that is, that they know what they want to, need to, or otherwise should learn), which is not always true. Furthermore, it falsely implies that education is best understood as a business transaction. That said, in my experience, students enjoy participating in critical discussion of this model of education. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See also Moody-Adams (1994, especially p. 304), where she emphasizes that cultures are not themselves agents and cannot force anyone to do anything. Indeed, cultures cannot be perpetuated without agents making choices about how to do so. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Mars and FitzGerald (2019). For more detailed discussion, see Klinenberg (2018).

    “Social infrastructure” can also refer to internet services that allow for the integration of social functionality into applications’ user experiences (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\_infrastructure 3/21/2019](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_infrastructure%203/21/2019)), but I set aside this alternative use. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The earliest uses of it that I found, via the Google Books Ngram Viewer, were in United Nations and U.S. government reports about global development. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. One potential objection to my view is that if many, most, or all concepts are grasped innately, then we cannot be morally responsible for grasping them initially, since that involves no activity on our part. Fair enough, but I am not defending a claim about *how many* concepts we are morally responsible for grasping, so I am willing to accept the weaker versions of that claim (those using “many” or “most”). However, even if the stronger claim (that *all* concepts are grasped innately) is true, it does not impact my argument in Section 3.2. I myself reject that stronger claim, but if I did accept it, I would simply jettison the argument from Section 3.1 that we are morally responsible for grasping concepts, while maintaining that we are responsible for thinking in terms of them.

    However, if grasping a concept is a matter of degree (which seems right), then while we are not morally responsible for our innate grasp of a concept, we may still become morally responsible for better or more fully grasping it if and when we do. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. By saying this, I do not mean to take a stand on the debate between dualists and physicalists in philosophy of mind. The point is simply that adherents of the semantic view have already accepted the existence of abstract objects that do not exist in space-time as our physical bodies do, so it makes sense for them to avail themselves of the idea of mental activity (whatever that is) that engages with such objects.

    One major hurdle here is how to fully account for the relations that can hold between agents and concepts, given that abstract objects are causally inefficacious. Anyone who thinks of concepts as abstract objects must face this challenge. Options for how to deal with it include the following. First, one could argue that at least some abstract objects *are* causally efficacious (see Davies 2019, Friedell 2019, and Dodd 2007: 10–16). Second, one could argue that we can have intuitive awareness of abstract objects *even if* they are causally inefficacious, either because abstract objects partially *constitute* intuition experiences (Chudnoff 2013) or because we can stand in a non-spatial, non-temporal, non-causal, intentional relation of conscious directedness to them (Tieszen 2002). Third, one could argue that we can have empirical knowledge of abstract objects even if they are causally inefficacious because they are mental entities which we can access via a sort of internal perception (Shaffer 2017).

    Granted, most literature about this challenge focuses on types of abstract objects *other than* concepts, but extending an existing view to cover not just repeatable artworks (as in Davies 2019, Dodd 2007, and Friedell 2019), mathematical objects (as in Chudnoff 2013, Davies 2019, and Shaffer 2017), and/or physicists’ idealizations (as in Shaffer 2017) is a reasonable approach. Any of the above three options is compatible with my conclusion. Regarding the third option, my argument against the perceptual analogy on pp. 12–13 is relevant; we must exercise evaluative judgment along with internal perception in order to grasp concepts in the sense of having empirical knowledge of them. Regarding the second option, grasping concepts in the sense of being intuitively aware of them would still reflect the agent’s evaluative judgments. Regarding the first option, I would need to concede that concepts can partially cause the initiation of the grasping relation, but only if the agent cooperates as partial cause in a way that involves evaluative judgment, as in my discussion of the waitress of knowledge on p. 10 (plus, see Juvshik 2018 and forthcoming for criticisms of that first option).

    To be clear, I myself am not committed to the semantic view–I am only arguing that *if* concepts are abstract objects, we can be morally responsible for our relations to them, however we should understand those relations. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Brandom (1994, p. 8) for a claim about perception and action both essentially involving concepts. On varieties of “the” underdetermination thesis, see Stanford (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This invites worries about an infinite regress and thus questions about innate concepts. See, for instance, Goldberg and Rellihan (2008, especially pp. 156–157). However, engaging with that debate would be a distraction here. Besides, I am not saying that *all* concepts must be grasped via concepts one already grasps, but simply that this seems the most plausible explanation of the case under consideration. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. If there were any incentive to grasp SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE (or disincentive not to), and if that (dis)incentive played any role in initiating K0’s grasp of the concept, K0 would have had to (maybe unconsciously) figure out that such a (dis)incentive existed and make an evaluative judgment about whether, and if so, how to pursue the relevant benefit. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Remember, K0 did *not* have to be consciously aware of making any evaluative judgments, nor make them intentionally, in the sense that it was under their fully voluntary, direct control whether or not to do so. However, the constraints of rationality are relevant to what K0 did. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. K0 may have also labeled this new concept. To do so would require an implicit evaluative judgment that it would likely be worthwhile to be able to think, talk, and/or write in terms of this concept in the future. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Fredericks (2018a). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Of course, being praiseworthy or blameworthy is insufficient to determine whether, by whom, and how one should be praised or blamed. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. I say “consciously” because, having grown up in a thoroughly white supremacist society, I have a fairly predictable bundle of implicit biases; while I assiduously try to understand and root them out, they certainly impact my thinking in various ways of which I am not always aware. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. I take ceasing to grasp a concept as a special case of forgetting. See Smith (2005) on why we can be morally responsible for forgetting. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See Croom (2011, especially p. 346). See also Brandom (1994, especially pp. 124–127) for discussion of choices between concepts and justification of such choices. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See, for example, Schatz (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. My goal here is to highlight two different concepts that might be falsely believed to be co-extensive. Extreme Islamophobes might even falsely think that ARABIC-SPEAKER and TERRORIST are co-extensive. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See Fredericks (2018b, pp. 1388–1389 and 1392) for more on this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. On the importance of combining individual and structural solutions to such problems, see Madva (2016 and 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See, for instance, Mills (1997) on epistemologies of ignorance, Fricker (2007) on hermeneutical injustice, Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012) on willful hermeneutical ignorance, and Woomer (2019) on active ignorance. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. For related arguments (albeit not about responsibility in particular) and a similar call to philosophical action, see Burgess and Plunkett (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Many thanks to Jeremy Fischer, an anonymous *European Journal of Philosophy* referee, and to Justin Capes, Randy Clarke, Michael McKenna, Angie Smith, as well as the rest of the participants at the Workshop on Moral Responsibility and Blame at Wayne State University in 2019, especially the organizer, Jada Twedt Strabbing; they all provided helpful comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)