

THE MYTH OF CONCEPT PUBLICITY

El mito del carácter público de los conceptos

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I defend the claim that concepts are not public. I argue that two of the main constraints for theories of concepts, namely (1) that concepts are public and (2) that they serve to explain Frege Cases, are in tension. (1) requires concepts to be individuated coarsely, while (2) requires concepts to be individuated finely. Thus, no theory of concepts can accommodate both (1) and (2). I argue that (2) is a non-negotiable constraint for theories of concepts, while (1) is negotiable. Therefore, theories of concepts should individuate concepts finely enough to solve Frege Cases, and claim that concepts are not public.

Keywords: G. Frege, concepts, concept individuation, publicity constraint.

RESUMEN

El artículo defiende la tesis de que los conceptos no tienen carácter público, argumentando que existe una tensión entre las dos restricciones principales a las teorías de los conceptos, a saber: (1) que los conceptos tienen carácter público y (2) que sirven para explicar *casos fregeanos*. La restricción (1) exige que los conceptos sean individuados burdamente, mientras que la (2) requiere que sean individuados finamente. En consecuencia, ninguna teoría de los conceptos puede satisfacer las dos restricciones. Se argumenta que la (2) es una restricción no negociable de las teorías de los conceptos, mientras que la (1) sí es negociable. Por lo tanto, las teorías de los conceptos deben individuarlos de manera suficientemente fina para resolver *casos fregeanos*, así como sostener que los conceptos no tienen carácter público.

Palabras clave: G. Frege, conceptos, individuación de conceptos, restricción relativa al carácter público.

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There is no consensus regarding what concepts are, what their ontological status is, and how they should be individuated. However, despite wide disagreement on these matters, many philosophers seem to agree as to what the constraints on theories of concepts should be. Among these constraints there are two that, I will argue, are in tension. The first one is the so-called “Publicity Constraint”, according to which a theory of concepts should make concepts shared, that is, concepts should be individuated in such a way that they are shared by different individuals and by different time-slices of the same individual. The second one, which I will call “Frege’s Constraint”, is that concepts should serve as theoretical tools with which we can explain Frege Cases, i.e. cases in which a subject believes or desires *Fa* but not *Fb*, despite the fact that *a* and *b* refer to the same object, and in which the subject is not being irrational. I will explain that no theory of concepts can satisfy both constraints, because the Publicity Constraint requires that concepts be individuated coarsely, while Frege’s Constraint requires that concepts be individuated finely. I will explain that Frege’s Constraint is a non-negotiable constraint for theories of concepts, but the Publicity Constraint is negotiable, since the consequences of claiming that concepts are not public, in the strong sense of being identical across people, are not as bad as they may seem. Therefore, theories of concepts should individuate concepts finely enough to be able to solve Frege Cases, and claim that concepts are not public.

The structure of this paper is the following. In the first section, I explain the two constraints on theories of concepts, and in the second section I explain the tension between these constraints: why satisfying the Publicity Constraint requires that concepts be individuated coarsely and Frege’s Constraint requires that concepts be individuated more finely. This tension is exemplified by showing the failure of both defenders of the idea that concepts are mental representations and defenders of the idea that concepts are abstract objects in trying to make their theories of concepts satisfy both constraints. In the third section, I explain why Frege’s Constraint is a non-negotiable constraint on theories of concepts while the Publicity Constraint is negotiable. Finally, I conclude that the best option for resolving the tension is to individuate concepts narrowly enough to explain Frege Cases, while accepting that concepts are not public.

Two Constraints on Theories of Concepts

Concept Publicity

The publicity requirement on theories of concepts is accepted by many theorists of concepts (for example, Rey, Peacocke, Fodor 1998, Prinz). It seems that it must be satisfied for concepts to play the explanatory roles they are supposed to play. First, it is widely agreed that concepts play an extremely important role in linguistic communication. The idea is that people understand what other people say because they associate the same concepts with the same words. It is argued that if no two people associated the same concepts with their words, communication would be impossible. Second, concepts figure in our intentional explanations of behavior, that is, in our explanations of behavior that appeal to the mental states of the person whose behavior we are trying to explain. Intentional explanations of behavior make reference to propositional attitudes, and propositional attitudes are mental states that paradigmatically involve concepts. Intentional explanations often generalize, i.e. they can subsume many different people. Actions are often motivated by the same propositional attitudes, for example, different people may go to the sandwich store for the same reason, namely that they are hungry and believe they will find sandwiches in the sandwich store. But actions can be motivated by the same propositional attitudes only if those attitudes involve concepts that are shared. Thus, the fact that intentional explanations often generalize indicates that concepts must be shared.

Frege Cases

Frege Cases are cases in which a subject believes or desires *Fa* but not *Fb* despite the fact that *a* and *b* refer to the same thing, but she is not being irrational. The subject does not know that *a* and *b* are coreferential, and this affects her behavior (or her inferences involving *a/b*) in such a way that the subject's behavior does not conform to our intentional generalizations.

A classical example is the famous case of Oedipus, who wanted to marry Jocasta but did not want to marry his mother, although Jocasta and his mother are the same person. Oedipus's problem is that he has two ways to represent the same person and he does not realize that they refer to the same thing. This makes Oedipus's behavior constitute an apparent counter-example to the following generalization:

(M) *Ceteris paribus*, if people believe that they should not marry their mothers and wish not to marry their mothers, they avoid marrying their mothers.

Oedipus satisfies the antecedent of (*M*), but he does not satisfy the consequent because he marries Jocasta, who is his mother.

Theories of concepts have to explain what is going on in Frege Cases. They have to individuate concepts in such a way that there is an explanation of why someone can have concepts with the same referent and not know it. Frege Cases are taken as one of the main motivations to claim that concepts should be individuated by something more than their referents. If one were to individuate concepts only by their referents, then one would have to accept that Oedipus's concept JOCASTA and Oedipus's concept MY MOTHER are the same concept, and would have to claim that Oedipus is being irrational. But, since it is agreed that though Oedipus is making a mistake, he is not being irrational, it seems that we should claim that his concept JOCASTA and his concept MY MOTHER are different concepts, and that the reason Oedipus fails to act according to (*M*) is that he fails to associate his two concepts; he does not realize that they have the same referent. Thus, theories of concepts are forced to accept that there is something more to concept individuation than reference. However, what a theory takes to be that "something more" can make a lot of difference regarding its success in explaining Frege Cases.

The Tension between the Constraints

Individuation: The Fine Push vs. The Coarse Pull

I explained above that, in order to explain Frege Cases, concepts need to be individuated by something more than reference. The question is what else we can take as individuating of concepts in order to be able to explain Frege Cases. Frege's own proposed explanation invoked appropriately individuated *senses*, and thus we may construe Frege's senses as a proposal as to what concepts are. The success of Frege's proposal depends, of course, on what senses are taken to be. Suppose we take them to be descriptions that people associate with referents (this sometimes seems to be Frege's idea about what senses are). We could say, for example, that Oedipus's concept JOCASTA is different to Oedipus's concept MY MOTHER because the former is something like "the wonderful woman I wish to marry" while the latter is something like "the woman that engendered me". This may work for Oedipus's case. We can say that he just does not realize that the wonderful woman he wishes to marry and the woman that engendered him are the same woman. However, there are Frege Cases for which this kind of solution does not work.

The problem is that for any description it is possible for someone to think that it is satisfied by more than one referent, even if in reality

it is satisfied by only one. Suppose that Bob thinks there are two people named 'Albert Einstein', although there is only one. Suppose that all he believes about either Albert Einstein is that he is a famous German physicist of the twentieth century. Bob is then capable of entertaining both Albert Einstein₁ thoughts and Albert Einstein₂ thoughts, and he does not believe that Albert Einstein₁ and Albert Einstein₂ are the same person. Thus, poor Bob believes that Albert Einstein is Albert Einstein, and does not believe that Albert Einstein is Albert Einstein. Since Bob associates exactly the same description with the referent, we cannot use this description to explain this Frege Case. In other words, senses, if taken to be descriptions, are too coarse to explain Frege Cases. Something finer is required. This example thus demonstrates that Frege's Constraint pushes a theory of concepts in the direction of individuating concepts more finely: Frege Cases give us reasons to *distinguish* concepts that have the same referent and/or the same sense.

Now, before considering ways to individuate concepts more finely so that the recently rehearsed Frege Case is explained, let us turn to the question of how concepts should be individuated in order to meet the Publicity Constraint. This will make the tension between the two constraints apparent. Concepts are shared if we individuate them only by their referents. If all that is needed for us to say that two people share the same concept cow, for example, is that cow refers to the same set of animals, then of course concepts are shared. Will senses do? Can we claim that concepts are shared if senses are shared? If senses are some sort of description of referents, then it will follow that senses are individuated not only too coarsely to satisfy Frege's Constraint, but also too finely to satisfy the Publicity Constraint. For it is unlikely that different people associate exactly the same descriptions with the same referents. Thus, the Publicity Constraint pulls a theory of concepts in the direction of individuating concepts more coarsely: the requirement that concepts be shared gives us a reason for *identifying* concepts that have different senses.

To see the tension in its full power, I will exemplify it by showing the trouble which the defenders of the idea that concepts are mental representations, and also the defenders of the idea that concepts are abstract objects, have in trying to make their theories satisfy both constraints.

*First Example of the Tension: The Representationalist's
Failure to Accommodate Both Constraints*

Many current theories of concepts share the view that concepts are mental representations. According to this sort of representationalist

view, the Publicity Constraint is satisfied because distinct people often instantiate different tokens of the same mental representation type-identifying concepts with mental representation types would thus seem to be a good strategy for satisfying the Publicity Constraint. But in order to satisfy Frege's Constraint, these types must be individuated appropriately: for any instance of a Frege Case involving *Fa* and *Fb*, the token representations corresponding to *a* and *b* must be tokens of distinct types. But how is this result to be secured? How are token mental representations to be identified as falling under the same type in such a way that every Frege Case involves tokens of distinct mental representations types? Different ways to type mental representation tokens have been proposed. Some theorists have claimed that in order to explain Frege Cases we have to individuate mental representations semantically, that is, whether or not two mental representations tokens are instances of the same type depends upon their semantic properties or content (See for example Segal). Other theorists, however, think that we should individuate types non-semantically, that is, whether or not two tokens are tokens of the same type depends not on their content but on some physical, syntactic or formal property (see for example Fodor, Laurence and Margolis, Sutton). As will become evident, neither semantic individuation nor non-semantic individuation serves to accommodate the two constraints. I will explain both options and the tension between the constraints will become apparent.

Semantic Individuation

The idea that concept individuation should be semantic can be summarized in the following thesis:

(*SI*) Two mental representation tokens in different heads (or in the same head at different times) are of the same type if and only if they have the same semantic content.

Now, to be able to explain Frege Cases under *SI*, theorists cannot maintain that the semantic content of a concept is constituted by the concept's reference. The problem with claiming that the content of a concept is its referent is that many intentional generalizations, such as *M* above, turn out to be just false, or not even make sense, when they are read transparently. Although under this kind of individuation content is public, it does not seem to slice mental representations finely enough. In order to explain Frege Cases there seems to be a need to type-distinguish coreferential mental representations.

Thus, it seems that *SI* can only serve to explain Frege Cases if the content of concepts is taken to be *narrow*. Narrow content is usually

taken to be constituted by functional roles. Functional roles are defined in terms of some of the causal relations of a concept token, those that enter in the law-like generalizations involving the concept type the token belongs to. What makes this kind of content narrow is that the generalizations invoke only causal relations among *proximal* stimuli, other concept tokens, and a proprietary set of behaviors like basic motor-gestures (only causal relations among things “inside the skin”).

Functional individuation slices concepts, i.e. mental representation types, finely enough to allow us to explain Frege Cases. Oedipus fails to satisfy *M* because the functional role associated with his concept *JOCASTA* is different from the functional role associated with his concept *MY MOTHER*. However, functional individuation is too fine to satisfy the Publicity Constraint. For, as Fodor himself has argued in several places (for example, in Fodor and Lepore), it seems extremely unlikely that we could produce interpersonally shareable functional roles for mental representations. In fact, it is unlikely that we could specify fixed functional roles for the mental representations of *one* person across time. There seems to be no principled way to decide which of the causal relations a mental representation enters into are to be counted as part of the individuating functional roles and which are not, which seems to point in the direction that we should include *all* the causal relations a mental representation enters into as part of its functional role. The problem is that the causal relations between a mental representation and other mental representations or behaviors change all the time (because the subject gets more information, for example), so if they *all* are part of the mental representation’s functional role, the functional role changes all the time, which means that if we say that a mental representation is individuated in terms of its functional role, then no two mental representations can really be of the same type, and thus no concepts are shared.

Non-semantic Individuation

The idea that concept individuation should be non-semantic can be summarized in the following thesis:

(*NSI*) Two mental representation tokens in different heads (or in the same head at different times) are of the same type if and only if they share the relevant sort of non-semantic properties.

NSI allows for different proposals as to which non-semantic properties are the ones that individuate concepts. There seem to be two options here: either we take the relevant properties to be the physical properties of mental representation tokens, or we take them to be the syntactic/formal properties of mental representations.

The physical properties of a mental representation could be something like neural properties, or physical configurations of the brain. This kind of individuation would allow us to explain Frege Cases, since we could say that the reason that Oedipus fails to satisfy *M* is that his concept *JOCASTA* is realized by a token that has different physical properties than the token that realizes his concept *MY MOTHER*. But typing mental representation tokens in this way makes concepts non-shareable, since distinct tokens would seem to always have different physical properties. Indeed, two tokens would be tokens of the same type on this view only if a very strong form of type-physicalism were right, so that whenever a given concept was instantiated it corresponded with exactly the same physical configuration in the brain. But we have more than enough reasons to believe that type-physicalism is not right, since no two brains are physically alike, and no two time slices of one brain are physically alike.

Many who defend non-semantic individuation for concepts believe that the non-semantic properties we should take as individuating concepts are the syntactic/formal properties of mental representations. Of course, there is the problem of defining exactly what these properties amount to. Fodor claims that they have to be defined in terms of functional roles. The problem with this is that there seems to be no way to specify functional roles in non-semantic terms, but if we specify them semantically, we are back to narrow semantic individuation, which, as I explained above, makes concepts non-public. Another syntactic option is proposed by Sutton, who says that we should take the syntactic properties that individuate concepts to be lexical properties. Sutton defines lexical properties as basic dispositional properties of subjects. Two mental representation tokens, he says, have the same lexical properties if a thinker has a basic disposition to take them as tokens of the same concept type (*cf.* 99-100). One problem here, however, is that although we can in principle explain Frege Cases appealing to lexical properties defined in this way, since we can say, for example, that Oedipus fails to satisfy *M* because his token mental representation *JOCASTA* and his token mental representation *MY MOTHER* have different lexical properties and are therefore tokens of different types (i.e. instantiations of different concepts), this does not give us a way to individuate concepts interpersonally. How are we to tell if two different people are disposed to take their respective token representations as tokens of the same type? How can we tell if my concept *JOCASTA* and Oedipus' concept *JOCASTA* have the same lexical properties? Under Sutton's definition of lexical properties, these properties only serve to compare concepts within a single mind. Thus, lexical individuation does not account

for publicity. But perhaps the main problem with Sutton's definition of lexical properties as dispositional properties is that appealing to them in the explanation of Frege Cases seems to violate what Schiffer calls the "intrinsic-description constraint" (510-511). According to this constraint, the characteristics that individuate mental representations (Schiffer puts this in terms of modes of presentation, but it applies to whatever properties of mental representations are supposed to account for Frege Cases) cannot be said to be "such characteristics that play the role of accounting of Frege Cases", on pain of circularity. If lexical properties are defined as dispositions of subjects to treat two mental representation tokens as tokens of different types, the explanation of Frege Cases is circular.

Second Example of the Tension: The Abstractionist's Failure to Accommodate Both Constraints

Theories that conceive of concepts as abstract objects come from the Fregean tradition, and in contrast with theories that conceive of concepts as mental representations, do not see concepts as particulars "in the head" of individuals. Defenders of concepts as abstract objects believe that it is the ontological status of concepts as abstract objects that makes them satisfy the Publicity Constraint (see for example Glock). Abstract objects are the kind of thing that can be shared across individuals. Following the Fregean tradition, abstractionists about concepts often claim that Frege's Constraint is also satisfied if one allows modes of presentation. However, for modes of presentation to serve their purpose of explaining Frege Cases, they themselves cannot be abstract objects, since then we would not have an explanation of the psychological phenomenon of Frege Cases. Modes of presentation, if they are going to serve the explanatory purpose of explaining Frege Cases, have to be "in the head" of individuals (or at least have to be the kind of entity that can be grasped in different ways, and these different ways of grasping have to be processes "in the head"), which not only goes against what abstractionists claim, but also makes them non-shared. If modes of presentation are going to serve to explain Frege Cases, then they have to be "in the head" and have to be individuated finely, as representationalists claim. But if they are, then they are not shared, and the Publicity Constraint is not satisfied. (*cf.* Fodor 37-39 for a related argument).

Which Constraint Can We Give Up?

Since there is no individuation of concepts that can account for both the Publicity Constraint and Frege's Constraint, and therefore no theory of concepts can accommodate both constraints, it seems

we should abandon one of these constraints. In what follows, I will explain why we should abandon the Publicity Constraint¹, and not Frege's Constraint.

Let me start by explaining why theorists of concepts should not be prepared to negotiate the requirement of giving an explanation of Frege Cases. What theorists of concepts have to ask themselves is what could explain the occurrence of Frege Cases if what explains them is not a difference among the concepts that a subject has for a given referent. A view that tried to give an explanation of Frege Cases without appealing to differences among a subject's concepts for the same referent would be a view that held that a subject can believe *Fa* but not *Fb* despite the fact that *a* and *b* refer to the same thing, *and despite the fact that a and b are the same concept*. It seems to me that this position is not tenable, because there seems to be no plausible explanation of why someone may believe *Fa* but not *Fb* if her concepts *a* and *b* are the same, that does not attribute irrationality to the subject. For example, it is not because Oedipus is being irrational that he fails to satisfy *M*. But if the explanation of why Oedipus fails to satisfy *M* is not that Oedipus is being irrational, it seems that we should attribute to him two different concepts that have Jocasta as their referent, two concepts that he fails to identify as concepts of the same referent. Thus, it seems that no theory of concepts could avoid having a story to tell about why Frege Cases occur, a story that has to involve an explanation of the difference between coreferential concepts that makes it the case that someone can fail to identify them as being coreferential.

The Publicity Constraint, by contrast, is negotiable. I explained in section 1 that the main motivations for this constraint are, on the one hand, that if concepts are public, we can explain communication and, on the other, that if concepts are public, we can explain why intentional explanations generalize. Now, what theorists of concepts have to ask themselves is whether publicity, understood as requiring different people to have exactly the same concepts, is really required to explain communication and the success of intentional generalizations. Does communication require that we share exactly the same concepts? And do we need the concepts involved in our intentional generalizations to be exactly the same across subjects in order for the generalizations to apply to those subjects? I believe the answer to both these questions is no. All we need to be able to communicate and to make intentional generalizations is that concepts are sufficiently similar across people. There

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 1 As I will explain, abandoning the Publicity Constraint understood as requiring subjects to share exactly the same concepts does not mean we have to give up a weaker "Shareability Constraint", that requires subjects to have *similar* concepts.

have been many attempts to explain how concept similarity is enough to account for both communication and the success of intentional generalizations (see for example, Clark and Prinz, Lalumera, Schroeder).

Is it so bad to claim that concepts are really not the same across subjects (and also not the same across time-slices of the same individual)? No, it is not as bad as it seems. Communication requires only similarity of concepts. Depending on the situation at stake, and also depending on what theory of concepts we accept, different amounts and kinds of similarity among the concepts of different people are required. In fact, many times all that is required for communication to succeed is that different subjects identify the referent their respective concepts have, at least in the sense that matters, which is, in the end, to cause coordinated action among individuals that lead to the satisfaction of common goals. In the same vein, most of our intentional generalizations apply to many different people because we share an environment, which makes a lot of our concepts share referents. Many times those generalizations apply just because different people's concepts apply to the same things, even if the concepts themselves are different across people. Sometimes, granted, more than just sharing referents is needed for communication and successful intentional generalizations, and here is where we have to appeal to the notion of concept similarity. Depending on the kind of theory we hold, we may have to construct the notion differently. For theories that conceive of concepts as structured mental representations, some semantic notion of similarity is required (*cf.* Lalumera and Schroeder for proposals of such a notion). For atomistic theories, such as Fodor's, some non-semantic notion of similarity is required. The point is, however, that there is in principle no reason to suppose that concept similarity is not enough to explain how communication is possible and to explain the success of intentional generalizations.² Therefore, the Publicity Constraint, understood as requiring theories to claim that concepts should be identical across individuals, can be abandoned. This does not mean that we should give up a weaker constraint, a "Shareability Constraint" that claims that for communication to be possible and

2 There is some skepticism about the usefulness of the notion of similarity. Fodor (30-33) has argued that the notion of concept similarity presupposes a notion of concept identity. This may be true, but I do not think it constitutes a problem for similarity theorists. The initial problem is not that we lack a notion of concept identity, but rather that, under many accounts of identity of concepts, concepts cannot be identical across individuals and across time for the same individual *if we are to be able to explain Frege Cases*. But there is no reason why we cannot presuppose these notions of identity in our accounts of similarity, and I do not see why this would undermine our notions of similarity.

for intentional generalizations to succeed, concepts need to be *similar* across people.

As I said before, how similar concepts should be for communication to happen, or for intentional generalizations to succeed, depends on the situation. Still, someone may wonder if there is a set of conditions that have to be met in order for concepts to be sufficiently similar for successful communication and intentional generalization. Theories of concept similarity in general try to give such a set of conditions. I believe this is misdirected. What we have to ask is not how and in which ways concepts have to be similar for communication to succeed and intentional generalization to be possible, but rather whether communication happened. Is it possible to generalize? If this is the case, it means the concepts were sufficiently similar. In other words, asking for a theory of similarity that gives a set of conditions that concepts have to meet in order to be sufficiently similar for successful communication and intentional generalization *inverts* the order of explanation. If communication happens and if intentional generalization is possible, concepts are sufficiently similar. So in order to determine that two concepts are similar in two individuals, all we have to do is see whether they communicate and whether the same intentional generalizations apply to both of them. If this is the case, then we can claim that they have similar concepts. We can further ask in *which way* concepts are similar in a specific case of successful communication, but here what is required is not a general theory of the similarity of concepts, but rather an empirical investigation about how the subjects involved in that specific case represent whatever it is they were communicating about.

Conclusion

I explained that no theory of concepts can satisfy both the Publicity Constraint and Frege's Constraint, since satisfying the Publicity Constraint requires concepts to be individuated coarsely, while satisfying Frege's Constraint requires concepts to be individuated finely. I then explained that the Publicity Constraint, understood as requiring exact identity among the concepts of different individuals, can be abandoned, since the facts about communication and intentional generalizations that are supposed to support this constraint can be accounted for by holding that concepts are similar among individuals. I also explained that to be able to explain Frege Cases is a non-negotiable requirement for theories of concepts, since there is no plausible way to explain Frege Cases without appealing to differences in co-referential concepts.

Given that any plausible theory of concepts has to be able to explain Frege Cases, and the Publicity Constraint can be abandoned, we should give up the Publicity Constraint. Concepts are not public.

Does this mean that theories of concepts as mental representations should be preferred over theories of concepts as abstract objects, since they seem better at satisfying Frege's Constraint? I do not believe that the question of the ontological status of concepts implies one or another type of concept individuation. The two issues can be treated separately. However, insofar as theories of concepts as mental representations seem more suited to allow for finer grained individuation of concepts, they seem to have an explicative advantage over theories of concepts as abstract objects.

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