Christopher Peacocke

A STUDY OF CONCEPTS

262pp, MIT Press. £24.95.
0262 161338

philosophy of mind. The topic is the conditions under which individuals can think thoughts of certain kinds, or the conditions which individual thought.

This topic has become central because of several arguments that seem to show that what goes into determining whether an individual can think often partly beyond the boundaries of the individual's mind, brain, or skin. I will not review these arguments here. Suffice it to say that they have been a well-known in discussing the theory of mind is the belief that individuals depend on their environment causally, to come to have mental states as they are in. That point is uncontroversial and barely interesting to a philosopher.

The point is that the very nature of many mental states presupposes some relations to the individual's environment. They cannot be individuated apart from reference to environmental relations.

Christopher Peacocke’s A Study of Concepts is a development of this tradition. Indeed, it is an attempt to produce the beginnings of a systematic theory of possession conditions for concepts. The book is an excellent one. It is difficult reading because it is closely reasoned and makes few concessions to the uninformed. But it advances a number of fresh, bold proposals; and it provides an attractive combination of sophistication, argu-

mentation, strong ideas, and originality. I harbour some doubts about some of the more general ambitions. But I think that there are real advances, especially in the discussion of perceptual concepts and perhaps also in the discussion of the concept of belief.

The primary systematic aim of the book is to advocate a theory of concepts that would eventually provide non-circular, necessary and sufficient conditions for the possession of all concepts. These conditions are to take the form: "Concept F is that unique concept to possess which ..." where the dots are filled in by a condition that adequately mentions possessing concept F (or having a propositional attitude involving the concept F), and does not involve any of a variety of more subtle circularities.

Peacocke’s reductionism is more modest than that of many other philosophers. But I am doubtful about this sort of enterprise on a variety of grounds. (I might emphasize that many of the specific discussions would remain valuable even if their reductive form were abandoned.) Very few successful explanatory enterprises take a reductive form. My worry is that the attempt to avoid circularity may sometimes force moves that are of questionable explanatory value.

For example, one of the fullest possession conditions that Peacocke gives is that for the concept of conjunction ("and"). The account is used as a paradigm within the book. The idea is that having that concept is finding informational relations of certain forms provoking compelling thoughts and just because they are of those forms. The term "primitive compelling" is a technical one, probably an important one, and the author explains it well. For present purposes, it can be taken to mean "obvious". To be successfully reductive, the account must presume that it is explanatory to say that the conception of the concept F involves particular forms of information, and it is found to be obvious because of their form, where the causal explanation ("because") makes no assumption about conjunction as part of the meaning or content of the form of inference. For making such an assumption would be to use in the explanation what one is trying reductively to explain.

But it is not clear that what makes one find deductions involving conjunction obvious can be directly specified apart from reference to conjunction. It is not clear what it is to cause something compelling by some relation to (a syntactic) form - where the causal relevance of one's relation to the form in no way involves understanding, or having, a logical concept like conjunction. What is clear is that a person who possesses a logical concept must find contentful logical truths or inferences compelling; and that their form has something to do with the explanation as to why. But whether the form can carry the burden of explanation apart from the logical content is doubtful. At best, this is something that awaits a better established psychology that the syntactic computational theories that would be congenial to this approach. It does not appear to be an explanation that is a priori acceptable, as Peacocke’s theory of possession conditions suggests it to be.

There is another possible problem about the explanation in terms of non-contentful forms. To understand the forms as forms of inference, one must have some understanding, however inexplicit, of deductive consequence (or necessary preservation of truth). But it is not clear that one can have this notion without having the logical concepts in terms of which particular deductive arguments are expressed. I do not think that such circularities are at all bad. But they do threaten reductionistic explanations.

A second ground of doubt about the reductionism, or perhaps just ground for further development, is that people seem to possess concepts that they only partially understand. The theory under discussion assumes that possession conditions and mastery conditions coincide, except in a few fairly circumscribed cases involving intercultural and deference to others. But partial understanding seems to be much harder to circumscribe than the theory presumes it to be. There are "natural-kind" concepts, scientific theoretical concepts, mathematical concepts that theorists seem to come to understand more and more deeply through deeper theorizing. There seem to be different levels of full mastery of concepts. Some concepts, and their understanding, seem to involve a deep open-endedness to the nature of...
Trust and reality

A. W. MOORE

Hilary Putnam

RENEWING PHILOSOPHY
067476093X

In this bold, energetic and extensive work, Hilary Putnam undertakes a revitalization of philosophy. He wants to put philosophy back in touch with the "human" and "always been philosophy's highest goal to articulate". This involves him in a close investigation of where philosophy is, where it is currently going, where it could be going, and what is its role in the world today. Putnam suggests, this is probably due in no small measure to his own earlier efforts. He writes with characteristic brevity, some would say with characteristic sloppiness, but there is never any doubt that underlying the writing is deep, rigorous thought. This is exciting and en-thusiastic. With Putnam, the approach limits its illumination, and will do so exponentially as conceptual inter-dependencies are confronted by more serious fail-ures. I conjecture that no account saddled with a reductive commitment can be both systematic and explanatory illuminating.

I n my view, the strongest parts of the book are the discussions of particular concepts. The treatment of perceptual concepts substan-tially advances understanding of the specific ways that perceptual presentation is environmentally dependent. Peacocke's discussion of perceptual range goes beyond the standard view of what a concept approach limits its illumination, and will do so exponentially as conceptual inter-dependencies are confronted by more serious fail-ures. I conjecture that no account saddled with a reductive commitment can be both systematic and explanatory illuminating.

The book also has a fresh and challenging discussion of the concept of belief. It attempts to provide a unified account of the first and third person aspects of the concept. The appeal to consciousness in the account of the authority of self-knowledge seems to me promising. Peacocke wants to explain our authority in our judgments about our own propositional attitudes by maintaining that to have the concept of belief partly consists in forming believing beliefs about one's conscious beliefs. He argues plausibly that there is a notion of conscious belief that does not presuppose accessibility to judgments about such belief. The relevant notion of conscious belief is, however, somewhat elusive and its explanatory connection to self-knowledge is not as transparent as I would like. Still, it is an interesting proposal. Although the phenomenon of consciousness is close to home, providing clear conceptions of it has been notoriously difficult. On this topic it is an achievement just to say something new that is not ridiculous.

There are many other fine things in this book - discussions of the metaphysics of abstract objects, of relations between philosophy and psychology, of normative discourse. In my view, the book is best and most interesting when it is least con-cerned with reduction or with legitimating mentalistic concepts. It has a richness that repays study, and it seems to me a step toward further loosening the strictures of the past.

The domain of the mind forms a wonderfully complex subject for philosophical reflection. The complexity, stability, and flexibility of our mentalistic discourse suggest that its cognitive value is well established. It is comparable in centrality and durability to our discourse about ordinary physical objects. Both philosophy and psychology can contribute a great deal to our understanding of mind without assuming that mentalistic notions must be explained in other terms.

CULTURE OF COMPLAINT

The Fraying of America

Robert Hughes