

Having a Concept Has a Cost

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Concept possession often has epistemic value.

- Can think new thoughts that allow one to better understand the world.
- Can be used in interpreting others who think with the relevant concept.

But is there ever any epistemic cost to possessing a concept?

For limited agents like ourselves, yes (clutter avoidance).

But are such costs only due to our contingent limitations?
Any cost for idealized agents?

Plausibly:

Costlessness: possessing a concept never in itself has epistemic costs.

My thesis: **Costlessness is false.**

Basic idea: concept possession often has an unavoidable opportunity cost.

Example: recall Mary, from Jackson (1982).

I have a concept Mary lacks: RED_{ph}.

This has epistemic value. It allows me to, e.g., know what red is like. It also allows me to understand other RED_{ph}-users' thoughts in an especially direct way.

But it also has an opportunity cost. I don't fully understand Mary's ignorance. Someone else who has never seen red would better understand her in some respect.

And it seems to me I won't be able to fully understand her while I still have RED_{ph}.

1 Preliminaries Concerning Concepts

concept: ability to think some particular thought(s)/content(s).

I can think thoughts about rational numbers, young children can't.
I have the concept RATIONAL NUMBER, young children don't.

I can think certain thoughts about redness that Mary can't.
I have the concept RED_{ph}, Mary doesn't.

Worry from Ball (2009): given content externalism, there is no thought about red that Mary can't have.

Mary after having seen red:

(1) I used to wonder what it's like to see red, but now I know.

Idea: **individuate concepts like we individuate other abilities.**

Point 1: determinate/determinable relationship

Point 2: what counts as the same ability is context-dependent, and different ways of having an ability may count as two different abilities.

(2) Reinhardt could play the guitar both before and after his accident.

True, but the more determinate guitar-playing ability was different before and after.
Response to Ball's worry: Mary can think the same contents, but in different ways—she has different more determinate red-thinking abilities before and after seeing red.

2 The Argument Against Costlessness

(i) There are some pairs of concepts which are incompatible, in the sense that one cannot possess both.

But (ii) these concepts have independent epistemic value.

So, (iii) whichever one someone has, they'll necessarily be missing out on some epistemic value, simply because they have the concept they do.

So, (iv) having the concept they have, then, in itself has some epistemic opportunity cost.

So, (v) Costlessness is false.

3 A Value of Concept Possession: Epistemic Empathy

Do concepts provide us any epistemic value beyond helping us know certain facts?

Yes (consider Mary's gain of RED_{ph} , assuming physicalism).

A fairly general source of value: understanding others.

If you share RED_{ph} with me, you can understand me better than pre-revelation Mary can, even if she knows all the facts about me.

Epistemic empathy: attributing a thought to someone using the same concepts the attributee uses.

Pre-revelation, Mary can't attribute thoughts about redness to me in an epistemically empathetic way.

But similarly, I don't share Mary's more determinant way of thinking about red, so also cannot attribute thoughts to her in an epistemically empathetic way.

Possession of each RED_{ph} and RED_{Mary} have some epistemic value.

4 Incompatible Concepts

Possessing one ability can be logically incompatible with possessing another.

Familiar cases from paradoxes of omnipotence: can't have both

an ability to make an object so heavy that nothing can lift it

an ability to lift any object that anything can make

Another case: being able to lose to a mediocre chess player while trying to win.

Similarly, on my view, concepts can be incompatible.

With Mary's (relatively determinate) way of thinking thoughts about red, no matter how hard one tries, one cannot think of any plausible, specific answers to "What is it like to see red?"

But with my (relatively determinate) way of thinking such contents, I have easily with reach a variety of full answers to this question, including the right one.

Our determinate ways of thinking of these contents, then, are incompatible.

5 Why care?

- Implications for epistemology of concepts (for another time).
- Implications for projects appealing to idealized thinkers.

E.g., scrutability theses from Chalmers (2012): if an appropriately idealized agent knew all of some base truths, they could know all the truths there are.

But if we take truths to be fine-grained, the above might show that there could be no such agent, no matter how idealized, since there may be some truths that can only be known with RED_{ph} and others that can only be known with a concept incompatible with RED_{ph} .

Comparable to Nagel (1986). But even Nagel thinks that a "being of total imaginative flexibility could project himself directly into every possible subjective point of view, and would not need such an objective method to think about the full range of possible inner lives" (p. 17).

On my view, there cannot be any point of view from which everything could be fully understood.

— THE END —

6 Follow-up

Thanks to Annette Martín and Jens Kipper for very helpful comments!

Step 1: go very fine-grained on concept individuation, so that even very good simulation isn't using the same very determinate concept.

Step 2: appeal to two (controversial) claims about understanding. That there's a way of understanding other agents which goes beyond causal explanation and prediction (Grimm (2016) and others), and that some of understanding's epistemic value has to do with integration (Gardiner (2012) and others).

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