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Atomism about Concepts

Concept atomism is the view that most lexical concepts (i.e., most concepts associated with single words in natural languages such as English) are not composed from other concepts. They are semantically unstructured, or primitive. For example, the concept *dog* is not built from *furry*, *quadruped*, *animal*, or any other concepts. Consequently, a thinker can possess the concept *dog* without possessing any other concepts in particular, and can thereby think that Lassie is a dog without being able to think that Lassie is furry, that Lassie is a quadruped, that Lassie is an animal, etc.

Concept atomism was first formulated and defended by the philosopher Jerry Fodor. On his version of the view, concepts are symbols in a language of thought that acquire their referents by virtue of standing in appropriate causal relations to those referents. For example, the concept *dog* is a mental symbol that refers to dogs not because of its relation to other concepts, but because of its causal relation to dogs.

Motivations for Atomism

One motivation for concept atomism is the suspicion that, dictionaries notwithstanding, most lexical concepts cannot be rigorously defined. Consider, for example, the concept *justice*. Ever since Socrates, philosophers have struggled to define this concept, and with little apparent success. Yet if *justice* were built from other concepts, we should be able to say what those concepts are. We should be able to define it. Atomists thus conclude that *justice* is a primitive concept.

Some philosophers have replied that *justice* is anomalous, and pointed to concepts that seem to be easier to define. For example, the concept *bachelor* might seem to be definable in terms of the concepts *unmarried* and *man*. But atomists are skeptical. Imagine a 60-year-old grandfather who never took his vows, but has been in a committed, monogamous relationship with the mother of his children for 40 years. It seems inappropriate to classify him as a bachelor. Or consider the Pope, who is certainly an unmarried man, but again does not qualify as a bachelor. Atomists argue that examples such as these show that even concepts such as *bachelor* are ultimately indefinable, and thus primitive.

A second motivation for atomism derives from the apparent fact that people can think about things about which they are ignorant or misinformed. For example, the philosopher Hilary Putnam claims to be ignorant of the difference between elm and beech trees. But when he thinks, *This forest contains elms*, he is nevertheless thinking about elms, not beeches. Atomists take this to show that the concept *elm* cannot be structured from other concepts (e.g., *tree with doubly serrate leaves*) since when Putnam thinks about elm trees his ignorance prevents him from employing those other concepts.

Objections to Atomism

Opponents of atomism are not persuaded by these considerations. They argue that while concepts such as *bachelor* and *dog* may be difficult to define, it doesn't follow that they are indefinable; and that any person who doesn't know the difference between an elm and a beech doesn't really have a concept of either. Additionally, opponents of atomism point to two counterintuitive consequences of the view.

First, it is natural to assume that learning a concept is a matter of learning which concepts it is built from. For example, a child acquires the concept *bachelor* by learning that something is a bachelor if and only if it is unmarried and a man. But if concepts are unstructured, this picture of concept learning is in trouble. For if the concept *bachelor* isn't composed from the concepts *unmarried* and *man*, then acquiring the concept *bachelor* cannot be a matter of learning that bachelors are unmarried men. Concept atomism thus conflicts with a tempting view of concept learning.

Not all atomists are troubled by this conclusion, however. On the one hand, Fodor embraces the view that most lexical concepts are unlearned. This does not necessarily mean that we are born with concepts such as *bachelor* and *carburetor*, but it does lump them together with sunburns, pubic hair, headaches, and other things that we acquire in life without learning. On the other hand, atomists such as Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence attempt to defend the idea that concepts are learned by specifying methods of concept learning that do not involve uncovering a concept's constituent structure.

A second worry about atomism concerns its ability to distinguish co-extensive concepts, such as *water* and H_2O, *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus*, or *Mark Felt* and *Deep Throat*. Given that the identification of each of these pairs was newsworthy, it seems reasonable to count each concept as distinct. But given that the members of each pair refer to the very same thing, it is less clear what makes them distinct. On a fairly standard account, these various concepts are distinct because they have different components. For example, the concept *water* might be composed from such concepts as *clear, drinkable,* and *liquid,* and the concept H_2O from *hydrogen* and *oxygen*. Notice,

however, that this standard account of what distinguishes co-extensive lexical concepts will usually be unavailable to the concept atomist since the atomist holds that most lexical concepts aren't built from other concepts. The atomist who doesn't want to deny the seemingly obvious truth that these various concepts are distinct must therefore find some other way to distinguish them. One possibility, embraced by Fodor, is to appeal to their differences at the symbolic level. For example, what makes the concepts *Deep Throat* and *Mark Felt* distinct is their association with different symbols in the brain—e.g., different tokens in a language of thought. But the plausibility of this approach, along with concept atomism more generally, remains controversial.

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See also Concepts, Philosophical Issues; Language of Thought; Causal Theories of Intentionality; Content of Thought

Further Readings

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