A more Plausible Kind of "Recognitional Concept"

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I find Fodor's argument against "recognitional concepts" very peculiar indeed. But I find the view that there are any "recognitional concepts" of the kind he (most directly) impugns equally peculiar. So I will take this opportunity to say a few words about another more plausible sort of concept that might actually better deserve the title "recognitional", and I will discuss the issue of compositionality for these concepts. In doing so, although I will not be defending the narrow target of Fodor's paper, I will be defending its broader target, the "epistemological" and/or "pragmatic" construal of what concepts are. But first I should say at least a word about why Fodor's argument seems to me so peculiar.

It's a sort of moebus strip argument. Rather than circularly assuming what it should prove, it assumes one of the things Fodor says he has disproved. It assumes that the extensions of those concepts thought by some to be recognitional are in fact controlled by stereotypes. Why do I say that? Because Fodor assumes that what makes an instance of a concept a "good instance" is that it is an average instance, that it sports the properties statistically most commonly found among instances of that concept. But that the "good instances" are always the common instances is remotely plausible only if we take concepts to be organized by stereotypes. True, a goldfish is not an average or stereotypical fish (SSis that true?) and the nursing profession is not average for a male and maleness is not average for a nurse. But there is surely is nothing borderline about the fishiness of a goldfish nor, typically, about the maleness of a male nurse or the petness of a pet fish. Notice also that good examples of some kinds of things are very hard to find, for example, good examples of the fallacy of accent, and good examples of wild children, and (nowadays) good examples of scurvy are hard to find. If good instances had to be instances that were average, including in respects having nothing to do with the point of the category being defined, and if recognitional concepts had to recognize by attending to average properties, then I suppose the recognitional ability defining the concept "sphere" would have to include the ability to tell whether a thing bounces!

Fodor says that a concept is recognitional if (1) it is at least partially constituted by its "possession conditions" (2) among which conditions is the ability to recognize some things that fall under it as such. But he also tells us that "if a concept is recognitional, then having certain kinds of experience would, in principle, show with the force of conceptual necessity that the concept applies." It is clear from this, and also from the text that follows, and also from the tradition that he is addressing, that the possession conditions for a recognitional concept are assumed to include more than just having some-ability-or-other to recognize those things that fall under the concept. They must include an ability to recognize those things in some particular manner or manners, these manners being what are really definitive of the recognitional concepts. That is, you cannot have the same recognitional concept that I do unless you rely on the same manner of recognizing. This leaves Helen Keller with very few recognitional concepts expressible in the English language.

Also, what the recognitional concept is of is supposed to be, just, whatever-it-

happens-to-be-that-gets-recognized-by-using-this-criterion. That is, although the recognitional concept is said to be an "ability", it is not the sort of ability that entails a success in contrast to a failure. It would be clearer not to muddy things this way but to call it a plain old "disposition".

I wish to contrast this description of "recognitional concepts" with another possible description that conforms equally well to Fodor's original definition but has quite different consequences.

Suppose that we adopt a flatfooted realist ontology, admitting certain objectively ("theory independently") repeatable properties and Aristotelian-like substances to own these properties. Let the substances be things such as (1) people, pebbles and bridges (c.f., Aristotle's primary substances), (2) water, gold, and peanut butter, (3) kinds such as dog-kind, geode-kind (c.f., Aristotle's secondary substances) and phillips-screwdriver-kind. In the case of the kinds, just as in the case of the individuals and stuffs, although philosophers and sometimes even Nature can construct borderline cases, "for the most part" (as Aristotle was fond of saying) whether or not one has encountered or collected an example of a certain one of these kinds is written in nature itself, not just in English or !Kung. These kinds are real, not nominal. I will say more to back up this ontology soon. Right now I wish only to argue that its introduction makes possible another interpretation of Fodor's definition of "recognitional concepts".

A recognitional concept, Fodor said, is "partially constituted by ... the ability to recognize some things that fall under it as such." Now how are we to interpret the phrase "as such"? Does it mean, say, that one is to recognize red as red rather than as green? And what would it be, exactly, to recognize red as green? Or what would it be, say, to recognize a cat as a dog? Would it be to apply the concept green to something red, or the concept dog to a cat? But then the definition is circular: it defines the concept red by reference to applications of the concept red, the concept cat by reference to applications of the concept cat. On the other hand, if the idea is that one should not confuse red with green, nor confuse dogs with cats, this cannot be made to fit with the notion that recognitional concepts are of just whatever they in fact recognize. This will not fit with the idea that "having certain kinds of experience would, in principle, show with the force of conceptual necessity that the concept applies." If the recognitional concept is taken to define its own extension, if its extension is whatever gets recognized under it, if it is whatever one is disposed to apply it to in using its criterion or criteria, surely the "as such" in the definition is entirely vacuous.

Suppose, on the other hand, that we take it that recognitional concepts recognize real properties, real individuals, real stuffs and real kinds. How now do we interpret the phrase "the ability to recognize some things that fall under [the concept] as such"? To re-cognize is to know again. To know something again as such must be to know that it is the same again, to identify it as being the same thing again. And one can be said to have an ability to do this only if it is possible to fail to do it, only if there are requirements on doing it that need not necessarily be met. But this will be the case exactly and only in so far as what one is trying to recognize has an objective identity independent of one's dispositions to recognize its identity. To make sense of Fodor's definition, we need a strong realist ontology.

Before asking whether we can have one, notice this consequence. If the

methods that one uses to identifySSbetter, perhaps, "reidentify"SSan objective individual, property, stuff or kind do not determine the extension of one's concept of it but, rather, have the task of correctly locating that extension, then there may be room for alternative methods of recognizing the same thing, alternative ways to have the same conceptual ability, the same concept. It is easy here to get hung up on words. If I peel potatoes easily with a paring knife while you demand a proper potato peeler, do we have "the same ability", or not? We can both peel potatoes. That is what I have in mind. And it is that kind of ability that constitutes having "a concept" in the fundamental sense, of an Aristotelian substance. Identifying things the same way that someone else does is an added frill, more clearly labeled as having the same "conception" rather than the same "concept". The advantage of talking this way is that then Helen Keller gets to know English, assuming that speaking English requires having the concepts that correspond to English words.

How then do we do the ontology? I have said quite a lot on this elsewhere (Millikan 1983 chapters 14-17, forthcoming a, forthcoming b, forthcoming c) but if we are to tackle the question about compositionality, I must give a sketch. I'll only talk about "substances," where the idea is roughly this. A substance is the sort of thing that one can learn about on one occasion of meeting, various things that will be applicable also on other occasions of meeting, and where this is no accident, but the result of some principle of real connection. Thus if I meet Sam today and discover that he is strong and a good violinist, there is a good chance that if I meet him tomorrow or next week he will be strong and a good violinist. This is not a dead certainty, of course, but if it is true it is true for good reason, not by accident. Sam today causes Sam tomorrow, conserving many of his properties over time, in accordance with principles of conservation and principles of homeostasis. Of course there are only certain kinds of grounded inductions one can make over encounters with Sam. The fact that he is sitting today or angry today or playing tennis today does not mean he will be when I meet him tomorrow. Indeed, an important part of having a hold on Sam's identity, of having an adequate concept of Sam, is knowing roughly what kinds of inductions to draw over instances of meeting him. Understanding that he is a human person is in large part understanding which kinds of inductions these are. It is understanding not so much what properties he has, but what kinds of questions can sensibly be asked and answered about him.

Similarly, meeting gold on one occasion I can learn about its luster, malleability, density, color, tastelessness, conductivity, chemical inertness, and so forth, and when I encounter it again it will have these exact same properties, all of them. On the other hand, its shape, its size, its owner are none of them things that will carry over to the next meeting with gold, or if they do happen to carry over it will be an accident, not a grounded connection. Similarly, from one flat worm in the lab tray I can learn a great deal about other flat worms of the same species, as I spend perhaps hours dissecting it. And there is a good reason for this, for the genes in the gene pool from which the flat worm comes produce copies of themselves, and homeostatic principles operate in the dynamics of that gene pool to keep variety among the individuals of the species within strict limits.

Now try phillips screwdrivers. They are made to fit extant phillips screws which

were made to fit then extant phillips screwdrivers and so forth, thus reproducing themselves in an indirect sort of way. Someone invented the phillips screwdriverSSpossibly Phillips? And people have been copying that general design ever since, copying those aspects of it that were serviceable for certain purposes. There is a reason why phillips screwdrivers are much alike, why one can recognize them as a kind and draw rough inductions over themSSnot many inductions to be sure, but the ones there are are well grounded. Compare also Gothic cathedrals and 1995 Nissan Sentras. The members of each of these kinds are alike for good reason too, and here the variety of possible well-grounded inductions is larger.

The broad picture is this. Basic concepts are concepts of real properties and real substances. They involve (I do not say "are") real, though inevitably fallible, abilities (not mere dispositions) to recognize these real entities. But typically the ability to recognize a substance or property is useful only if one can recognize it under a variety of different conditions: when it is near and when it is far; under various mediating conditions such as different lighting conditions and sound- carrying conditions; despite interference of static of various kinds. Think how many ways you have of recognizing manifestations bearing information about any member of your immediate family. You can use looks from a thousand angles, voice through many mediating conditions, handwriting, characteristic habits, clothing, and probably thousands of tidbits of identifying information. And notice two things.

First, these methods do not constitute a <u>definition</u> of that family member. Concepts of ones friends are not analytical concepts, but synthetical ones. The same is true for the ordinary person's concept of water and of cat-kind. The abilities to recognize that partially compose these concepts are not composed of prior concepts, not built on analytical definitions.

Second, though you have many ways of identifying each family member, similarly for water and cats, there will always be many conceivable conditions under which you wouldn't recognize them, conditions under which manifestations bearing information about them are not or would not be apparent to you. Moreover, in the case of less familiar substances it is quite possible to have recognitional concepts of them, in this sense, while lacking the ability to recognize them in their most common manifestations. For example, at the beginning of term I often have concepts of various students that I am not yet able to recognize anywhere outside my classroom. And I have a concept of the metal nickel, though I can only recognize it in the form of U.S. five cent pieces.

How now does Fodor's demand for compositionality fare when applied to this sort of recognitional concept? What happens when concepts of this sort are combined? Consider conjunctive concepts built on base substance concepts. Unlike the base concepts that compose them, typically these concepts will not themselves be concepts of substancesSSof individuals, stuffs or real kinds. For example, black cats do not form a real kind. There is probably nothing to be learned (nonaccidentally) from one black cat about other black cats that does not follow independently either from their both being black or from their both being cats. From this it follows also that there is no way to recognize black cats without recognizing independently that they are black and also that they are cats. Putting this in Fodor's terms, the concept <u>black cat</u> "inherits all

its satisfiers from its constituent concepts".

It does not follow, however, although it may happen to be true in this case, that if one has the concept of black and the concept of cat then one can recognize typical (Fodor says "good examples of") black cats, or recognize black cats under typical conditions. Try this example for illustration. Little Johnny is quite good at recognizing Daddy, and also quite good at recognizing Santa Clause costumes. It does not follow that he will recognizing Daddy in a Santa Clause costume. On the other hand, if he approaches Daddy in a Santa Clause costume from a certain special perspective, if he sees Daddy put on the costume, then he will recognize that it is Daddy in a Santa Clause costume. And that is all that is necessary for him to have a recognitional concept of Daddy in a Santa Clause costume. Parallel is recognizing male nurses and pet fish. Being able to recognize the most common cases straight off is not a requirement on a recognitional concept (in this sense) of anything.

But there is another sort of example to consider. Take red sulphur. It is an allotropic form of sulphur, having many of its own properties not characteristic of sulphur generally. It is an (Aristotelian) substance in its own right. It also happens to be the only substance that is both red and (pure) sulphur. So is the concept of red sulphur a compositional concept? For some people yes and for others no. Not knowing that sulphur that is red is a substance in its own right, one would only have an analytical concept of red sulphur. That is, one would never identify red sulphur in any other way than by noting that it was sulphur and noting that it was red. And one would not attempt inductions from one sample of red sulphur to another that would not have been attempted either from any sample of red to another or any sample of sulphur to another. On the other hand, one might instead have a synthetical concept of red sulphur, in which case it is conceivable that one wouldn't know it was red or even, perhaps, that it was sulphur. One might recognize it as the sticky so-smelling stuff typically found in such-and-such context. Similarly, I suggest, conceivably there are two ways to have a concept of Californians, though I'm sure even Fodor will admit that their status as a real kind is a bit looser than the status of red sulphur as a real stuff.

Bibliography

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_____ forthcoming a, "A Common Structure for Concepts of Individuals, Stuffs, and Basic Kinds: More Mama, More Milk and More Mouse", Behavioral and Brain Sciences

_____ forthcoming b, "Historical Kinds and the Special Sciences," Philosophical Studies

_____forthcoming c, "With Enemies Like These I Don't Need Friends", replies to commentaries on (Millikan forthcoming a), Behavioral and Brain Sciences

Elm and Expert ch 4 (95): "deferential concepts" is an "epistemological phenomenon" rather that a "semantic" one. The epistemology of concepts? I blur these two together.