

Concepts and Our Understanding of Them

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It is difficult to say exactly what a concept or mental representation is, but as difficult as it might be to understand such things, their existence is undeniable. To begin with, concepts, for nearly everyone since the time of Aristotle, have been the things to which words refer (Aristotle 16a3-9). Except for proper nouns, words are given meaning or signification as they refer not to things but to concepts. These concepts are general ideas that unite and organize our experience. By grouping our experiences, which are always particular, these concepts allow us to speak and think in ways that would be otherwise impossible.

Among the Ancients and Medievals, most believed that our concepts or mental representations organized our experience into a correct understanding of the world. That is, that just as our perceptions are reliable because God has equipped us with perceivers that accurately reflect His creation, we are also equipped with the ability to conceptualize and group those perceptions correctly as well. Unlike our Ancient and Medieval ancestors who believed that we possessed a God-given ability to correctly conceptualize the world, today maintaining that belief is extremely difficult. Even if one believes that God did originally give us concepts that represented a correct conceptual understanding of the world, the fact seems undeniable that human beings and their language communities can create completely new concepts and refine and change existing ones. The fact that concepts change over time, and from one culture to another, is evidence of the fact that we can conceptualize our experience in a vast variety of ways.

Of course, we do have some sort of mental hardware that allows us to form concepts, and it is very possible that this hardware even universally prevents us from conceiving some things other than we do. Equally, the nature of some experiences may be such that alternative conceptual judgments are not possible. But in spite of all that, we have an enormous freedom in our ability to form concepts.

This freedom can easily be seen in children as they begin to acquire language. Their earliest concepts are often very different from the concepts that their language community associates with a particular signifier or word. The first concept a child might form and identify with the word *dog* might be a very general notion that includes many kinds of pets, or it may be very narrow

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and include characteristics unique to the child's own dog. It is only as more instances of the signifier *dog* are identified that the child's concept becomes something close to that of the language community. Thus, with their exposure to language the child's initial freedom to form concepts becomes restricted and their concepts are molded and come to conform to those held by the language community. Such conformity, however, is not toward some absolute concept which represents objective reality. Indeed, the concept or signification that our language community attaches to a particular word is arbitrary, at least in the sense that there exists an enormous amount of alternative ways that we can group our experiences into the concepts to which we attach words. Although our perceptual reality may be based upon an objective physical world, our conceptual reality is based largely upon the various ways our language community and culture have come to divide up the world.

Our culture chooses to distinguish black people from white people and we form concepts that allow for such a distinction, but an almost infinite variety of other conceptual races could be established based on an equally infinite variety of characteristics. Our concepts of black people and white people are clearly the result of a choice to form one specific concept of race rather than hundreds of other possible concepts. With diseases it is equally easy to see that the essential characteristics we select to form concepts are obviously nominal and the product of judgments rather than any God-given ability to form correct concepts. But if our concepts of things like races and diseases are nominal and of our own creation, then all, or nearly all, of our concepts are suspect. In order for us to claim any of our concepts as natural or God-given, we need to show why we believe such concepts have a status above being nominal and more than the product of human judgment and convention. Without a criterion to separate nominal from natural (or God-given) concepts, all concepts must be treated as nominal, and thus conceptual reality must be understood as a cultural and linguistic construct.

Furthermore, since the time of Saussure, most linguistic theories have maintained that the nominal concepts to which words refer are established by the rest of the language system, and do not have individual or atomic meanings in themselves. What gives meaning to the word *dog* is not so much a single definition, as it is the fact that the word *dog* refers to that which is not a cat or wolf. Thus, the signification or meaning of a signifier depends not on its relationship to something within the world, nor even to a single individual concept, but to a whole system of signifiers and what they signify (Saussure 120-122). Additionally, since language is dynamic and open to arbitrary changes over time, a change in the meaning or signification of one word changes the signification of another word.

In light of these contemporary insights into the nature of language,

today's Christian is faced with a problem of how to understand Scripture. If the words of Scripture and their signification are relative to the rest of language, and language is dynamic and ever changing, how is such a language able to express eternal and immutable truths? To put it another way, how can God use human language with its human, mutable concepts to represent or express His concepts which, since they are not the product of our language community, are most likely not at all like our concepts?

One possible solution to the problem of our mutable concepts which are subject to the vicissitudes of culture, language, and human judgment is to establish immutable concepts founded upon the basic forms of the phenomenal world. Some Christians have been attracted to something like Husserl's quest to discover the true rational essences or concepts that are the irreducible stuff of the phenomenal world (Husserl 340-44).

Such a project encounters a variety of problems. Two are particularly important. The first is that even if a Husserlian eidetic reduction did overcome the conventional and ever-changing nature of our concepts, such concepts, and the language that would be based upon them, would not help us with the problem of understanding the concepts set forth in Scripture since the Scripture was written without the aid of such phenomenological concepts. The second problem with such a project is that even if correct rational essences were achievable, and such essences did represent the basic forms by which God organized the phenomenal world, such essences are not very interesting and not what we ultimately desire. I believe our real interest or desire is not to discover concepts that represent the basic forms of the phenomenal world, but to discover concepts that represent God's intentional meaning. I am not so much interested in how God conceives the physical species of plants and animals. I am interested, however, to know how God conceptualizes things like love and faith. This is what I desire in order to know Him more intimately. But since the concepts I attach to words such as *love* and *faith* are relative to my language community and culture, I do not know the meaning or signification that God would attach to such signifiers.

Attempting to solve this problem by the kind of eidetic reduction Husserl had proposed might overcome the conventional nature of our concepts but it would not give us what we are really after, which is God's intentional meaning. To come to an understanding of God's concepts, we need to move in the opposite direction. That is, unlike the projects of Husserl or Kant, which attempted to overcome the personal and subjective nature of concepts, the concepts we seek are purely personal and subjective. Indeed, the concepts we seek to know are those personal and subjective concepts that exist within the noetic reality that is the mind of God. Before we can pursue an understanding of such concepts, however, we first need to more fully understand the way

these personal concepts are distinct from either the common concepts that lie at the base of our language communities, or the strict and rigid concepts that lie at the base of our scientific communities.

The Multifarious Nature of a Concept

Concepts are certainly multifarious and this is at least partially because human beings, and their language, function on several levels and thus so must their concepts. Wittgenstein acknowledges this when he says that we can create exact concepts for specific purposes and that these concepts stand as additions to the concepts we use for common language (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 68-69). Thus, there is the common concept of “water” which I communicate in order to satisfy my thirst, and there is an exact concept of “H₂O” which allows me to communicate a more precise meaning of the same signifier. But besides the common concept, and the more exact concept of water used by science, there is a concept of water that represents the stuff I played in as a child. This concept exists on a deeper level and is the kind of concept I wish to communicate in my more intimate communions. This deeper, personal concept goes far beyond the concept that the language community commonly holds. It is my private concept of “water” which has a unique meaning only to me, but it is nevertheless a concept that I sometimes wish to communicate to another human being (usually someone with whom I am intimate). The concept of water I communicate at this level is neither common nor scientific, but personal, and its meaning goes far beyond what is communicated on the common or scientific level.

On the common level, or even the precise scientific level, a concept is little more than a commonly understood boundary that separates one kind from another, while on the deeper and more personal level, a concept is really not common at all. Plato’s idea of a concept as an *eidōs* or what is common to all members of a species only applies to the common or scientific notions of a concept and omits completely the idea of a personal concept (Plato 72-79).

Unlike Plato, and nearly the entire tradition that followed him, Wittgenstein understood that language, and its concepts, function differently in different situations, and for different purposes (Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books* 1). In common communication, we use concepts for the purpose of utility, and thus knowing the intentional meaning of a speaker is not important, but at other times when we wish to communicate for the purpose of intimacy, the intentional meaning or personal concept of the speaker is what we are after. Thus, with our common concepts the concept is most often used as a means to identify the extensions of that concept, while with our personal concepts the instances or extensions of the concept are the means, and the purpose is to communicate the concept itself. Of course, an exact

communication of such an intentional meaning is impossible, but the purpose of this deeper communication is not to establish the kind of exactness sought in the sciences but to share with another person the way one uniquely conceptualizes the world.

How Personal Concepts Are Communicated

The way in which personal concepts are communicated is very similar to the way common concepts are communicated to us in our initial exposure to language. As we saw earlier, a child's concept may begin as something very different from that of their language community. It is shaped, however, as additional instances of a given signifier or word are provided. With the additional instances, eventually the child's concept becomes something close to the concept held by the language community at large. Likewise, the same is true regarding the communication of personal concepts. Here, however, the additional instances of a given signifier are all given by the same person, and the intention is not to understand a publically held concept in order to function within that language community, but rather to understand a personal concept in order to more intimately know that individual.

With human beings personal concepts may begin as common concepts acquired through language, but because they become concepts that are of particular interest and importance to us we attach additional meaning and significance to them. Such concepts often more genuinely define us than our occupations or social statuses, and they are what we want others to know about us. Such concepts represent the objects of our greatest interest and affection. The man who loves dogs has a very different concept of those animals than other members of the language community. He is familiar with the common concept, but his concept includes things that the one who is not a dog lover would have difficulty imagining. Similarly, the man whose interest is money has a concept of money that goes far beyond the concept others signify by the same word.

Ortega y Gasset says:

In truth, nothing characterizes us as much as our field of attention ... This formula might well be accepted: tell me where your attention lies and I will tell you who you are. (Ortega y Gasset 26)

This is certainly true, but our field of attention is always conceptually constructed. It is not what we perceive, that makes something important to us, but how we conceive it. More than our finger prints, the things that most truly identify and personalize us are those personal concepts which we have given

much time and attention to develop. These are the things we are often most attracted to in another person, and these are the things we share in our most intimate relationships.

In a marriage one way a spouse intimately communicates to their mate is by expressing the unique intentional meaning they attribute to certain important concepts. The first step in such communication is for the spouse to convince their mate that what they mean by a certain signifier is not what is commonly meant, and that the concept to which a signifier commonly or even scientifically refers is of little use on this personal level. Without understanding our natural estrangement from the personal concepts of others, we will never even begin to enter into communication on this deeper and more personal level.

After my wife has convinced me that I do not understand a particular concept that is important and unique to her, she then gives instances of what she does mean. As she sets out additional instances of her particular concept, I come ever closer to an understanding of her intentional meaning, just as I had through a similar process come to understand the public concept referenced by that word. The main difference lies in the fact that the private or personal concept is much more complex and includes many more aspects unique to my wife's experiences, judgments, and values. These unique aspects would certainly be eliminated from the public concept of that same signifier.

Knowing God's Concepts

To understand God's concepts, we need first to understand that neither the common concepts of our language community, nor the exact concepts of our science have equipped us to understand God's intentional meaning. Yet that does not mean that God is unable to communicate His meaning to us. If we consider that human beings are able to express their personal concepts by using the common concepts of their language community, it is not surprising that God can do the same. Indeed, God can make His concepts known to us, just as we can make our personal concepts known to others who are interested and give us enough time in order that we might express instances that denote our personal concepts.

In order to intimately know my wife, I need to know how she uniquely conceptualizes the world. I begin by understanding that I am not naturally equipped with concepts that enable me to know her most important and unique concepts. The same is true of my relationship with God. More so than with other human beings, our communion with God is especially estranged since God's concepts do not originate within a common language community or culture the way the concepts of human beings do. Thus, in order for me to enter the fullness of communion with Him, it is especially important that my

mind be renewed, and much of that renewal requires that I become acquainted with His personal concepts which are often very different from my own. The way God communicates His personal concepts is not unlike the way my wife communicates her personal concepts. That is, in much the same way that my wife sets forth examples or instances which serve as denotations of her unique concepts, God does the same thing through the instances and examples that are set forth in Scripture.

It is even possible for God to express concepts for which our language does not have a word. But that should not be a surprise since human beings often do the same thing. Philosophers in particular often communicate new concepts by describing instances or examples of such concepts unique to them alone, and in doing so they are forced to use the existing language and its commonly held concepts. Perhaps eventually a particular signifier or word will be associated with that concept, but it is not essential to the initial communication of that concept. Eventually the word *agape* became a signifier for the unique concept of God's love that was being communicated with the instances of Scripture, but the word *agape* did not have such a meaning when the Bible was being written (Danaher 11-12). Indeed, God's unique concept of love did not exist for us prior to the Scriptural instances that created it. That is, the defining characteristics of love that are set forth in the thirteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians, or the numerous examples of God's love such as Hosea's love for Gomer, or the fact that we are told that God gave His Son to be tortured and killed because of love, all serve as denotations of a concept of love that is very different from any concept of love that we might have acquired from our language community. But it is very natural that such a concept is not compatible with our concept, since the concept of love which is being set forth in Scripture is not a common concept at all, but rather God's personal concept of love.

Conclusion

The ancients and medievals, for the most part, imagined that concepts were God-given, or rather, God had equipped us with an ability to conceive the world correctly. But when we consider the instances that Scripture sets forth as extensions of a particular concept (as we see with the example of love), we often get a concept that is very different from the concept we commonly hold. That is because often the concepts that God wishes to communicate to us are His personal concepts, and personal concepts are very different from concepts formed either by our language communities or our scientific communities. The major difference between personal concepts and other concepts is the fact that personal concepts are not subject to changes in language and culture the way other concepts are. Of course our personal concepts may be influenced by such

changes but they are not dependent upon them simply because they are personal. Thus, the fact that the nature of language is ambiguous and unable to express precise and univocal meanings, does not prevent us from expressing personal concepts. Indeed, every postmodern writer who points out how ambiguous and unable language is to establish the kind of certainty and exactness that Enlightenment science had sought, is able, with that same language, to express their own personal concepts, and express them in deep and meaningful ways.

Today, postmodern trends should not present a challenge to Christians, since the ultimate purpose of language, especially regarding God and His communication with us, is not to express a single, univocal meaning. That is the perversion of Enlightenment thinking. The ultimate purpose of language is to provide signs and syntax from which a speaker can express their own unique concepts. The point of intimate communication is not to share words only for the sake of understanding the extension of a specific signifier, but to understand the personal signification that a speaker attributes to a specific signifier. This is the point of intimate communication, and just as Derrida's purpose is to get us to understand his personal concept of what he means by "*differance*" (Derrida 73-101), similarly, God's purpose is to have us understand His personal concept of what He means by "love." And just as it is possible for Derrida to express his personal concepts, it is also possible for God to express Himself in similar fashion.

The deconstructionists' claim that a multiplicity of meanings is possible from a given text is of course true, but no more so than the fact that I can make all sorts of meanings out of what my wife says, if that is my intention. But if I am intent upon understanding the meaning or personal concept my wife is attempting to express, I can do that as well, and thereby reach a greater intimacy with her. The same is of course true of God and His communication with us. If my intention is to make a multiplicity of meanings from His words, nothing within my own nature or the nature of language prevents me. But if my intention is to know God's personal concepts in order to enter into greater intimacy with Him, nothing within my own nature or the nature of language prevents that as well.

Of course, in order for us to understand God's personal concepts, we must come to Scripture with the intention of entering into an intimate communion with God by coming to know His personal concepts. To do so we must understand that neither our language community nor our scientific community have equipped us with concepts that enable us to understand what God is trying to communicate to us. If we come to Scripture believing that the concepts which our language community (or the concepts which an ancient biblical language community) provide are adequate, we will misunderstand the

Scripture as surely as we will misunderstand Derrida if we suppose that his concept of “difference” or “trace” corresponds to the concepts associated with such signifiers by our language community. With Scripture, God is putting forth His unique personal concepts as surely as Derrida is with his work. When reading a particularly unconventional philosopher, we very naturally understand that our conventional concepts will not allow us to understand what the author is attempting to express. Strangely we do not always apply this simple insight when reading Scripture.

Postscript

Because of the nature of the human mind to freely form concepts, and the nature of culture and language to arbitrarily change, we cannot achieve the kind of objective and universal conceptual understanding of the world that we have pursued from the time of the ancients until our present century. But all that means is that that ambition was ill conceived and based upon an illusion about the way the world is conceptualized. The truth is that our conceptual understanding of the world is never objective, but always subjective. Of course, there is an objective, external world but it is always conceptualized subjectively. Equally, there is an intersubjective reality to the concepts of particular language communities. The conceptual reality the Christian seeks, however, is purely subjective in that it is a reality which exists not “out there” within nature or a language community, but within the noetic reality that is God’s mind. Furthermore, we have access to at least a portion of that ultimate reality because God has chosen to reveal to us through Scripture some of His most important personal concepts.

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