CONCEPTS, BRAINS, AND BEHAVIOUR

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Summary
Concepts are best understood as a particular kind of human ability: a person who has mastered the use of a word for F in some language possesses the concept of F. Abilities are individuated by their possessors and their exercises, though they are not to be identified with either. Typically abilities are associated with vehicles, that is to say underlying actualities which account for their exercises. The mind is the human ability to form concepts, and its principal vehicle is the brain; but the mind should not be identified with the brain any more than it should be identified with the behaviour in which its concepts are expressed.

1. The mind as a capacity: concepts as abilities

It is common nowadays to reject a Cartesian notion of the mind. Few are prepared to declare themselves dualists: to maintain that in addition to material substances there are independent mental substances that are only contingently related to material bodies. But many different theories may lie behind an official rejection of the dualism of Descartes. We have to ask, what does a non-Cartesian account of the mind look like? If the mind is not a substance, what kind of thing is it?

The answer is that the mind is a capacity. (That, as Wittgenstein would say, is a grammatical remark). I call it a capacity rather than an ability because it is a comprehensive ability to acquire abilities. One might be tempted to call it a second order ability, but that would be to underestimate the possible stratification of abilities. There can be abilities to acquire abilities to acquire abilities … without limit.

The mind is the capacity to acquire linguistic and symbolic skills, which are themselves abilities of a certain kind. Language and symbolic skills such as arithmetic are themselves generalised abilities to acquire more specific abilities—as one does when one first masters long division or learns the meaning of a new word. We may use ‘concept’ as a term for the specific
abilities that are particular exercises of the universal capacity that is the mind. A sufficient, but not a necessary condition for a person to possess the concept of F is that she shall have mastered the use of a word for ‘F’ in some language.

Abilities and capacities are individuated by their possessors and their exercises, but they are distinct from both. The possessor of an ability is what has the ability: in the case of the mind, the human being whose mind it is. It is I who have a mind, know English, possess certain concepts and am exercising these abilities in writing this paper. The thing, the substance, that knows English is not my mind, but I myself. (Myself, not ‘my self’ whatever that might be.) My ability to speak English is a different individual item from your ability or President Obama’s ability: it is not just that we may differ in articulateness or fluency, but that there are three different items with different scopes, items which may vary, or cease to exist, independently of each other. That is the sense in which abilities are individuated by their possessors: but of course to say that there are in the world n abilities to speak English is only a fancy way of saying that there are n English speakers in the world.

Abilities are individuated not only by their possessors but by their exercises. Which ability we are talking about, on any occasion, is explained by specifying what would count as an exercise of that ability. The medicinal capacities of aspirin, for example, are exercised in episodes of pain-killing. Similarly, the speaking, understanding, writing or reading of English counts as an exercise of the knowledge of English. An ability is a more or less enduring state, while any particular exercise of an ability will be a datable event or process. Aspirins possess their capacity while bottled up in the medicine cabinet, but only begin to exercise it after being swallowed. The human mind lasts a lifetime, while its exercises are our fleeting thoughts and projects and the other variegated items of our mental lives.

2. Capacities and their vehicles

A capacity is clearly something distinct from its possessor and from its exercise, but it must also be distinguished from a third thing, which we may call its vehicle. Consider the capacity of whisky to intoxicate. The vehicle of this capacity to intoxicate is the alcohol that the whisky contains: it is the ingredient in virtue of which the whisky has the power to intoxicate. The vehicle of a power need not be a substantial ingredient like alcohol