Experimental Philosophy and Folk Concepts: Methodological Considerations*

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Experimental philosophy is a comparatively new field of research, and it is only natural that many of the key methodological questions have not even been asked, much less answered. In responding to the comments of our critics, we therefore find ourselves brushing up against difficult questions about the aims and techniques of our whole enterprise. We will do our best to address these issues here, but the field is progressing at a rapid clip, and we suspect that it will be possible to provide more adequate answers a few years down the line.

1. First, we need to get clear about what it is to provide a theory of a folk concept. Alfred Mele offers the following suggestion:

   By an analysis of a concept of X, I mean a statement of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of a thing’s being an X.

The problem with such an account is that it seems to say nothing about people’s concepts. (It would tell us, not about people’s concepts, but about the actual properties in the world that these concepts pick out.)¹ We

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¹ Of course, these two types of inquiry often turn out to be mutually supportive.
take it that a person’s concept is a particular type of mental representation. Hence, a theory about people’s concepts must be a theory about particular types of mental representations that people possess.

To see the difference between a theory about properties in the world and a theory about people’s concepts, one need only consider a definition like the following:

A triangle is a polygon whose number of sides is equal to the cube root of 27.

This definition shows that it is possible to give necessary and sufficient conditions for being a triangle in terms of cube roots, but it does not thereby prove that people’s concept of cube roots plays any role in their concept of triangles.

If we wanted to know whether people’s concept of cube roots actually did play a role in people’s concept of triangles, we could take into account a number of different types of considerations. One approach would be to actually conduct experimental studies. (For example, we could use priming studies to check to see whether hearing the word ‘triangle’ activated people’s concept of cube roots.) Another approach, though, would be simply to look at the definition itself. When we see that the mention of cube roots serves only to make the definition more complicated, we get at least some prima facie reason to suppose that cube roots don’t actually figure in any way in the relevant concept.

Much the same could be said about the relationship between people’s concept of intention and their concept of intentional action. Mele has suggested that it might be possible to create an extremely complex analysis of intentional action that draws in an essential way on the concept of intention. For example:

\[ PA2. S \text{ intentionally } A\text{-s if and only if } S \text{ } A\text{-s and either (a) } S \text{’s } A\text{-ing is caused in the right way by an intention to } A \text{ or (b) } S \text{ performs some action } B \text{ that is caused in the right way by an intention whose plan component represents } S \text{’s } A\text{-ing as a goal relative to } S \text{’s intended } B\text{-ing and } S \text{’s } B\text{-ing appropriately generates } S \text{’s } A\text{-ing } \]

Mele’s own work in action theory is a case in point. Although it was originally offered as part of an attempt to understand certain properties in the world, it has subsequently proved enormously fruitful and influential in research on people’s concepts.