CHANGING CONCEPTS*

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At the beginning of his paper (2004), Nenad Miscevic said that "empirical concepts have not received the epistemological treatment they deserve". When first reading this complaint I was surprised. Are the huge philosophical efforts to come to terms with concepts not primarily directed to empirical concepts? Miscevic insists, however, that concepts evolve, that we learn concepts and change concepts, and that this is most obvious in the case of empirical concepts like our concept of whales or our concept of water. I realized then that Miscevic has raised a most important question: *How can a concept change?* Why is this question important?

It is almost standard that a concept is, or may be represented as, an intension, i.e., as a function mapping possibilities to appropriate extensions. Disagreement starts when it comes to say what the possibilities are, which specific function a concept is, etc. It may also be that a concept rather is a two-dimensional entity, i.e., a function mapping two possibilities, possibly of different kinds, to extensions. This standard is widely agreed, and it is important to note that the standard is enforced by the fact that we want concepts to somehow build up propositions and that we want to somehow understand propositions as truth conditions.

However, the simple consequence is: different functions, different concepts. We can say that yesterday we had this concept and now we have that, but the standard conception does not allow us to say that yesterday's concept changed into today's. This consequence looks unacceptable.

Miscevic is right to point out that the problem is particularly important for an inquiry into the relation between concepts and apriority. If concepts may change, then, presumably, conceptual truths, i.e., truths in virtue of these concepts, may

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* Originally, this paper was a comment to Miscevic (2004); both papers were presented at the DFG conference *Concepts and the A Priori* held at the University of Konstanz at June 17-19, 2004. Small revisions were required to make it self-contained. Moreover, I added references and a few additional remarks. So, it can now be read as a relevant appendix to chapter 14 of his volume. I am very grateful to Nenad Miscevic for the illuminating exchange about the topic.

change as well. But this badly fits to the guiding idea that concepts are the source of apriority. If conceptual truths change under the influence of experience, they are rather a posteriori and not a priori, as Miscevic (2004) has elaborated. The issue indeed threatens the presuppositions of the dominant approach to apriority.

So, how may we conceive of changing concepts? What the standard conception describes is presumably only *states* or *stages* of a concept. The question then is what holds the various stages of a concept together so as to form one concept persisting through its possible changes?[1] Let me discuss five different answers:

The *first* answer is that it is simply the *word* used at various times to express the various stages of a concept. There is a lot of truth in this answer. Still, it is definitely unsatisfactory, for three reasons. First, we should leave room for non-linguistic concepts not expressed by words. Secondly, it is not so clear what a word is. One may think that a word is identified by its morphophonological shape. But this shape may change, too. So, we would need an account of words as persisting through their morphophonological changes. We may expect, though, that linguistics provide such an account. Thirdly, however, there is the objection, decisive in my view, that no morphophonological individuation of words will do. One and the same word shape may stand for different concepts, by being used ambiguously, by being used in different languages, or by changing to an entirely different meaning.[2] This is a familiar point. If words are to individuate concepts, they have to be semantically interpreted words, and since their semantic interpretation roughly consists in the concepts, we have first to individuate concepts in order to individuate words in this semantic sense. Hence, the first answer is unhelpful.

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[1] In the German context the question raises quite different associations. There was and still is a very influential movement focussing on so-called Begriffsgeschichte that provided the methodological foundations for the journal *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* founded by Erich Rothacker in 1955 and for the well-known encyclopedia *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* initiated by Joachim Ritter, a renowned student of Rothacker, in the 60's. „Begriffsgeschichte" may modestly mean the history of the usage of a philosophical word or term. The projects were, however, more ambitious; the idea rather was to present the history of the concepts themselves (within which concepts were certainly never conceived as functions from something into extensions). If Schröder (2000) is correct, the repeated criticism that it does not make sense to speak of a history of concepts beyond that of terms was never convincingly rebutted by that movement. That is, 50 years of German post-war philosophy did not really get beyond the first and the second deficient answer I am about to discuss. Not that I would help here concerning philosophical concepts. I am happy to talk about ordinary empirical concepts; philosophical concepts clearly are the most difficult ones for the semanticist.

[2] See the most illuminating discussion of Kaplan (1990/91) whom the question how words are individuated leads to quite similar considerations than the ones presented here.

A *second* answer is that the continuity of a concept lies in the continuity of its *possessor*. The answer is still incomplete; we would still have to say what makes for the continuity of a concept within the possessor. Anyhow, the proposal won't do. Whether concept-possessors are persons or entire linguistic communities, a concept does not live and die with its possessor. Moreover, if the possessor is somehow essential to a concept, it becomes difficult to explain how a concept can be shared by different possessors. There is a possibly useful notion of cultural identity according to which a cultural community is constituted by its shared concepts. Accordingly, we still form a cultural community with the ancient Greeks and Romans (to some extent at least). In this sense, it is indeed trivial that a concept is continuous with the community possessing it. However, the present proposal obviously becomes circular by this move.

A *third* idea proceeds from the observation that concepts have *aims*; concepts aim, we might say, at their subject matter. So, perhaps, the various stages of a concept are united by their common aim. To speak less metaphorically: What a concept is about, aims at, or attempts to grasp, is its actual extension or reference or rather, speaking two-dimensionally, its actual secondary or C-intension. And a concept may change while its reference remains fixed. Our notion of gold, e.g., has changed several times; still, it is always our notion of gold that always refers to the same stuff. When Putnam (1975) calls upon us: "Let's be realistic!", he refers exactly to this point, as Miscevic (2004) has again emphasized.[3]

I think this idea is on the right track; but it still won't do. Clearly, we, individuals as well as communities, may have two different concepts for the same subject matter, as long as we don't notice it; this is the familiar story about Hesperos and Phosphorus before the Babylonian discovery of their identity. Conversely, a concept may remain the same while changing its reference, as long as we don't notice it. This is the jade story. Originally, the reference of the Chinese jade concept was Chinese jade. Yet, after the massive import of substantially different, but phenomenologically indistinguishable Burmean jade into China the reference changed to Chinese *or* Burmean jade without, I contend, any change in the concept.

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[3] To be sure, Putnam (1975) is reluctant to speak of concepts. But he pleads that the intension at least of natural kind terms is rigid, i.e., the projection of their actual extension to other possible worlds, and that this intension remains constant throughout possible changes of our grasp of that extension.

For both of these exceptions the qualification "as long as we don't notice it" was essential. So it seems it is not the actual aim or reference of a concept that counts, since we might be in error about the actual aim in some way or other. What counts, this is the *fourth* proposal I want to make, is rather the *believed reference* or the *intended aim* of the concept.[4]

This fits well to the conception of concepts in Haas-Spohn, Spohn (2001). We have argued there that my concept of an object or a property is what I believe this object or property to *be*. Since what an object or property *is* is determined by its essence, the collection of its essential or metaphysically necessary properties, this means that my concept of an object or property consists in my belief about its essential properties. And we have argued that this conception does not only fit to our concepts of natural kinds, on which Miscevic has focussed, but also to our concepts of objects and other properties. The only modification I have to add in view of the present considerations is that what we then called concepts are rather concept stages in the present sense.

Given this conception of concepts or rather concept stages, there is no fundamental mystery in conceptual change. Beliefs about essences may change just as any other beliefs, and thus, in principle, all the well-elaborated accounts of belief change apply to conceptual change as well. The details and the particular role of beliefs about essences within our overall net of inductively connected beliefs would certainly need most careful considerations. Still, the framework is well prepared by Spohn (1988) and subsequent papers. The crucial point, of course, is that I have much more beliefs about an object or property than about its essence, and the former may change without the latter. Thus, not every belief change is a conceptual change. To avoid this badly holistic consequence was indeed our main goal in Haas-Spohn, Spohn (2001).

What is it, then, that unites all these concept stages to one concept? It is my belief that they are all about the same subject matter. If I first believe that, necessarily, whales are fishes, and then believe that, necessarily, whales are mammals and thus change my concept of whales, I still take these beliefs to be about the same subject matter, namely about *those* animals, and hence as expressing various stages of the same concept. This is how the fourth proposal to individuate con-

[4] Kaplan (1990/91) arrives at the corresponding conclusion concerning the identity of words through their history of usage.

cepts and the specific conception of concept stages Haas-Spohn, Spohn (2001) fit together.

How, then, should we relate analyticity and apriority to concepts thus conceived? Miscevic (2004) proposes to apply analyticity to concept stages, and thus the above assertions about whales become analytic relative to the relevant concept stages; i.e., "whales are mammals" is analytic relative to our present whale concept. Miscevic is right in calling this assertion a posteriori and thus arrives at paradoxical conclusions. I doubt that this is a wise terminological choice; I think we better relate analyticity to concepts and not to concept stages. At the end of this note, I shall touch upon the issue how much analyticity then remains.

Miscevic also distinguishes weak or superficial apriority related to concept stages and strong or deep apriority related to concepts, and he goes on to argue that all alleged conceptual apriority turns out to be only weak, thus suggesting that there is no strong apriority related to empirical concepts. I disagree; there are, I believe, also strongly a priori sentences. At least two kinds come to my mind:

The one kind is given by sentences of the form: "Whales are called 'whales'", or rather "whales are called 'whales' in my language". In a way, this is simply disquotation, but there is more to it. It brings out the a priori connection between a linguistically expressible concept and the word expressing it. This is the truth behind the first answer discussed above. We cannot identify a concept via an antecedently identified word; still, the one is a priori accompanied by the other. More importantly, this a priori sentence brings out that semantic deference is built into a concept right from the start. Whales are called "whales" not only by me, but by my teachers and by my linguistic community as well, and thus the power of determining what whales are is automatically deferred to my community.

The other kind of strongly a priori sentences has the form: "Most of what we take to be whales *are* whales". This has a Davidsonian ring. But it is not as general as asserting that most of our beliefs about whales are true; the a priori assumption is the more restricted one that most of our reference-fixing beliefs concerning whales are true. Moreover, the assumption does not ground in a theory of interpretation according to which a person can only be rationalized by the principle of charity as having mostly true beliefs. The point is rather that this assumption is the only base on which to change and develop our concept at hand; only

when its believed reference is largely maintained, we may claim to have changed our old concept rather than to have acquired a new concept.[5]

Note, by the way, that the apriority of "most of what we take to be whales are whales" entails the apriority of "there are whales". Quine (1969, p. 86) revolted against the analyticity of "there are dogs"; he then took the indistinguishability of "information that goes into understanding a sentence and information that goes beyond" as a further reason for abolishing analyticity. Apart from Quine's continuous refusal to distinguish analyticity and apriority, I think he is wrong. "There are dogs" is strongly a priori in Miscevic' sense. This is not quite to say that it is unrevisably a priori. But it is to say that we must believe that there are dogs as long as we have the concept of a dog; if we lose the belief (due to very strange circumstances), we lose the concept as well.

So, to resume, I contend, opposing Miscevic (2004), that there are some strongly a priori beliefs associated with a changing empirical concept. Indeed, I want to suggest that these beliefs are presupposed by the concept; otherwise, we could not meaningfully speak of that concept as a possibly changing one. Hence, these a priori beliefs embody my *fifth* and last idea for what it is that persists in, and thus individuates, changing concepts.

A final brief remark: We have seen that Miscevic relates analyticity to concept stages and thus arrives at paradoxical consequences. My observations suggest the question whether there are also strongly analytic sentences related to a concept. Only trivial ones, it seems, like "whales are whales", etc. In particular, if we follow Kripke in defining an analytic sentence as being a priori necessary, the above strongly a priori sentences associated with a concept turn out to be synthetic, since they are only contingently true. They are basically analogous to the sentence "I presently exist" which is the paradigm of an a priori, but contingently true sentence. Thus, we may perhaps vindicate old suspicions of Quine, Putnam, and others about the poverty of the notion of analyticity despite the richness of the notion of apriority.

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[5] This a priori sentence applies to each moment of time. This allows for the peculiar case where this sentence is true at all times, though the many gradual changes may accumulate so that we end up with applying a concept to objects most or all of which did initially not fall under the concept. I am not quite sure whether we should really say in such a case that we have the same concept throughout. This is, however, a general and well-known ontological puzzle.

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