

“Review of Machery’s ‘Doing without Concepts’”

Brian Ellis and Edoardo Zamuner

La Trobe University

Edouard Machery, (2009): *Doing without Concepts*. Oxford University Press

Every descriptive act involves reference and classification, and our concepts are our bases for classification. Therefore, all of our descriptive linguistic practices depend on our having concepts. So, we cannot do without them. We can, no doubt do without some of them, however, because we can refine or shift our bases of classification in all sorts of ways. And we can use different kinds of bases of classification. We can, as Machery says, use prototypes, exemplars, or theories of things of the kind K as bases for classifying things as members of K. Or we can use any mixture of these things to achieve our purposes. Some classifiers may use one kind of base, while others may use another, without obviously misunderstanding each other.

Prototype theory is based on the fact that people have the capacity to imagine things of various kinds, not only kinds of objects, but also kinds of events, processes, properties, relations and so on, and not only visually, but also auditorily, and in other ways. Each of these images is said to be ‘a representation’ of the kind of thing of which it is an image. This representation is our prototype of the kind, and, according to Machery, prototypes like this can serve as bases for classifying things that may be observed or described to us. According to exemplar theory, the bases of our classifications may sometimes be just exemplars, or clear examples, of the kinds we are dealing with. Thomas Kuhn’s concept of a paradigm, for example, is a good exemplar of exemplar theory. According to Kuhn, a paradigm is a notable, and much admired, work in an area of study that has come to define the standards for normal research in this area. It does so by determining what the main problems are in this field, how to go about solving them, and what would constitute an acceptable solution. According to theory theory, the bases for our classifications of things may sometimes be theoretical. That is, we may have some theory about what

makes a thing the kind of thing it is. If a given object, event, process, or thing in any other category, has the properties of things of the kind in question, then it is a thing of this kind, and that settles the question. The identities of chemical compounds, for example, are ultimately determined theoretically.

This is all good common sense. There are these, and perhaps other, kinds of bases for classifications, and therefore there are at least three different kinds of concepts of things. This, in itself, would not matter very much. But often we have two or more kinds of concepts of what we think of as things of the same kind. For example, Machery argues (in Chapter 3) that we have at least three different kinds of concepts of a dog, Dog₁, Dog₂, and Dog₃, corresponding to the three different bases for classifications. These heterogeneously based, co-referential concepts are the ones he is worried about, and seeks to eliminate. On the best available evidence, he says, such co-referential concepts are common. Yet the sub-concepts (i.e. the prototypes, exemplars and theories on which they are heterogeneously based) may have very little, other than extension, in common. They contain very different information, and ground different competences, as Machery competently argues in his first seven chapters. But then, in anticipation of what is to be said in Chapter 8, Machery makes the extraordinary claim that "... the notion of concept ought to be eliminated from the theoretical vocabulary of psychology because it might prevent psychologists from correctly characterizing the nature of our knowledge." (p.53). Thus, we should stop talking about concepts in psychology, and start talking about Concept₁, Concept₂, or Concept₃.

To justify his case for eliminating heterogeneous concepts from the technical language of psychology, Machery needs to show that heterogeneous co-referential concepts have led to serious errors in many different areas of psychology. It does not have to lead to any such errors, as the social historical concept of a paradigm clearly illustrates. It is a heterogeneous concept that has proved to be one of the most fruitful concepts in the history and philosophy of science—and indeed in a great many other areas as well. The question that Machery needs to address, therefore, is why there is a need to replace the unqualified term ‘concept’ with qualified expressions such as ‘prototypic concept’,

‘exemplary concept’, or ‘theoretic concept’, even when there is no dispute about the concept’s extension. Such distinctions might be relevant to studies of belief states in neuropsychology. But we doubt whether they are important in other areas of psychology.
–Brian Ellis and Edoardo Zamuner, *La Trobe University*.