

THE IMPLICIT CONCEPTION OF IMPLICIT  
CONCEPTIONS:  
REPLY TO CHRISTOPHER PEACOCKE

*Philosophical Issues*, 9, 1998, pp. 115-120.

Josefa Toribio

Department of Philosophy  
Washington University in St. Louis  
Campus Box 1073  
One Brookings Drive  
St. Louis, Mo. 63130, USA

e-mail: [pepa@twinearth.wustl.edu](mailto:pepa@twinearth.wustl.edu)

## 1. Introduction.

Peacocke's characterization of what he calls implicit conceptions recognizes the significance of a subset of contentful states in making rational behavior intelligible. What Peacocke has to offer in this paper is an account of (i) why we need implicit conceptions; (ii) how we can discover them; (iii) what they explain; (iv) what they are; and (v) how they can help us to better understand some issues in the theory of meaning and the theory of knowledge. The rationalist tradition in which Peacocke's project ought to be located is concerned with the nature of understanding. His notion of implicit conceptions is invoked to explain non-straightforwardly inferential but rational patterns of concept-involving behavior. We come to know about implicit conceptions because we treat the thinker's practices as having a certain representational content. They are implicit in what the thinker *does*.

I intend to focus on the question of what implicit conceptions *are* (although in doing so some of the other aspects will also come to the fore). I will argue for the following position: that—even at the personal level—certain inferential principles underlie the process that leads to the thinker's reliably differential responses and that subsequently point us in the direction of a notion such as that of an implicit conception. More precisely, I will argue that *practical* inferential processes are involved in the understanding-based capacities that support our ascription of personal-level implicit conceptions to the thinker. If I am right, then Peacocke's implicit conceptions don't preclude acceptance of personal-level conceptual-role theories because that practical inferential articulation, i.e. that conceptual role, is the implicit conception itself<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> The notion of conceptual role as inferential role that I have in mind is the one developed by Robert Brandom (1994) following Sellars' original ideas (1963).

## 2. What Implicit Conceptions are and What They Are Not.

Before the presentation of my argument, it might be helpful to rehearse what I take to be the key positive and negative features of implicit conceptions. On the positive side, we find (i) that implicit conceptions are understanding-based *capacities* that the thinker possesses and that lead her to the rational acceptance of certain principles and statements; (ii) that implicit conceptions are *content-involving states* (even though the thinker need not have any explicit knowledge of those contents); (iii) that they *play an explanatory role* in particular patterns of semantic evaluation and of object and property recognition and also *a justificational role* in the thinker's rational acceptance of primitive (logical) principles; (iv) that they involve concepts whose explicit characterization by a speaker *can be incorrect* without affecting the correctness of the implicit content; (v) that implicit conceptions are fundamentally *tied to judgments about particular cases*; and finally (vi) that implicit conceptions are concepts whose legitimacy can't be defended.

On the negative side, we are told that (i) implicit conceptions are not concepts for which the thinker has only a partial understanding of the expression. The thinker doesn't defer in her use of the expression to others in the community who understand it better; (ii) that implicit conceptions are not tacit or virtual beliefs. (iii) that they are not inferential dispositions; (iv) that implicit conceptions are not rules in Wittgenstein's sense; and finally (v) that the rational, justified acceptance of new principles involving a given concept precludes the idea that implicit conceptions can be characterized —at the personal level— in terms of their conceptual role.

Two caveats. First, the position that I am about to defend should not be taken as one in which implicit conceptions are just dispositions to correctly apply concepts in central cases. I agree with Peacocke that the classification of particular stimuli as instances of a general kind by the exercise of regular differential responsive dispositions may be a necessary condition of concept use, but it is

certainly not a sufficient one. Second, I also agree that in order for a thinker to count as having what Peacocke characterizes as implicit conceptions, he or she need not *inferentially* justify her claim, or her acceptance, or her recognition. The claim that —even at the personal-level— *practical* inferential processes are involved in the understanding-based capacities that support our ascription of implicit conception to the thinker doesn't imply that those inferential processes play a justificational role *for* the thinker, but only for the theorist who performs the ascription.

### 3. My Implicit Conception of Implicit Conceptions.

My contention is that for a reliably differential response to be a candidate for the expression of knowledge of the content of an implicit concept, the thinker who behaves according to the possession of that concept must have *some grip on its role in reasoning*. Otherwise implicit conceptions could not be characterized as understanding-based capacities at all. They couldn't be characterized this way because part of what 'being rational' means in this context involves displaying states, attitudes and practices that are liable to normative assessment. In other words, to be a thinker (rather than a mere behavior) is to be involved in a web of structured activity with a normative dimension. The movement of thought —as Peacocke likes to phrase the point— in which the rational thinker is engaged need not involve inference. But inference of a practical kind is indeed involved in grasping the normative force of such non inferentially acquired knowledge. That practical kind of inference is what *takes* the thinker from e.g. the utterance of a sentence such as 'This is a chair' to the acceptance of a commitment to the effect that there is a chair there.

What I mean by the thinker having '*some grip on the concept's role in reasoning*' is thus something like this. In order to count as a thinker and not a mere behavior, the agent must embrace, even in *non inferential* applications of the concept, certain normatively

pregnant attitudes whose manifestation is a commitment to *act* in a certain (rational) way. This reflection suggests that the content-involving implicit conceptions underlying the normative aspect embedded in the thinker's rational commitments can only be specified by the conceptual role they play in accounting for her behavior. The inferential commitment is, then, precisely the conceptual role of the thinker's implicit conception. As Peacocke's main argument against the plausibility of personal conceptual-role theories in accounting for implicit conceptions is based on the thinker's rational and justified acceptance of new principles involving a given concept, I'll now concentrate on that issue.

Let's re-consider the case of classical negation, a case that Peacocke examines in order to show how a personal-level conceptual-role theorist might treat the phenomenon of new principles. He claims that the personal-level conceptual-role theorist might

' ... include the classical logical inferential principles for negation: that from  $\sim \sim A$  one can infer  $A$ , and that if one can derive a contradiction from  $A$ , one can infer  $\sim A$ . Yet again it seems clear that these classical logical rules for negation (and their instances) are ones whose correctness can be, and needs to be, attained by rational reflection from some prior understanding of negation ... The implicit conception associated with the understanding of negation simply *links* the expression for negation with these already appreciated falsity conditions'.

(p. 20 of manuscript. My emphasis).

Now, what is the nature of that *link*? It seems to me that the link Peacocke is talking about has an inferential character of the kind I am advocating here, i.e., that to know the truth-, and therefore the falsity-conditions of a sentence already involves the sort of normative commitment that is conferred on that sentence by the role it plays in the thinker's practices. I grant Peacocke's point

that the movement of thought in which a rational thinker is engaged when coming to appreciate the meaning-determining role for classical negation cannot be explained as a result of her having explicitly inferred it from *logical* inferential principles. My point is that the understanding of the meaning-determining role for classical negation and its being a potential manifestation of knowledge couldn't be correctly ascribed to the thinker without her having *implicitly inferred* it from the *implicit knowledge* embedded in her rational practices (especially those that contain the connective involved, i.e., negation).

To invoke an implicit conception of negation in personal-level conceptual-role terms doesn't thus necessarily involve the need to appeal to the *logical* inferential principles that Peacocke has in mind, but it does require an appeal to features of the use of that expression that are inferential in a different sense, a sense that affects even our understanding of the truth-conditions of a claim that does not contain a negation. To see how this works one only has to change the terms of the *link* that Peacocke mentions—the link between the expression for negation and the already appreciated falsity conditions—and say, as e.g. Brandom does, that since 'the content of a claim can be represented by the set of claims that are incompatible with it' (Brandom, 1994, p. 115), its formal negation can be analyzed as '... the claim that is *entailed* [my emphasis] by each one of the claims incompatible with the claim of which it is the negation' (Brandom, 1994, p. 115). This characterization of our grasp of negation involves an implicit conception, but one whose correctness can only be appreciated by paying attention to the personal-level conceptual role it plays in rational practice.

The move I am making here might sound too close to one that Peacocke tries to undermine in his paper. It might sound like a proposal that Peacocke himself made in his earlier work, and that consists, basically, in saying that the rationally appreciated correctness of new principles '... is fixed by those [other principles] which are mentioned in the conceptual role *in some less direct way*' (p. 21 of manuscript. My emphasis). He points out that this strategy

leaves three problems unresolved. One is that the strategy cannot be applied to the 'ordinary' thinker. The second is that the strategy lacks the initial materials on which it needs to operate because there are cases in which all of the inference rules distinctive of a concept have to be worked out by a thinker. Finally, according to Peacocke, the strategy gives no rationale for the requirement itself.

However, I don't think these problems arise for the strategy proposed here. Firstly, the practical inferential capacity of the thinker to engage in rational behavior involving negation is not to be identified with mastery of a *logical calculus*, but rather with the usual understanding of sentences (even those not containing negation). This is certainly something we should concede to the 'ordinary' thinker.

Secondly, the case in which *all* the inference rules distinctive of a concept have to be worked out by a thinker is not a case that applies to the concept of negation as it has been characterized in our practical inferential treatment. The reason is again that some of those inferences are already present in the understanding of any claim and, furthermore, they are already embedded in any other kind of non-linguistic behavior that deserves to be called rational. Also, as a general point, I doubt very much that there are cases — other than stipulations involved in newly introduced symbols— in which all of the inference rules for a concept have to be worked out by the thinker.

Finally, the strategy *does* give a rationale for the requirement of appealing to the inferentially articulated attitudes underlying understanding-based capacities (although certainly not to Peacocke's requirement which is the need to invoke the strongest semantical assignment that validates some introduction rule mentioned in the conceptual role). The rationale, one that can be found already in Frege and in a more elaborate way in Dummett (Cf. Dummett, 1973), is that these understanding-based capacities need to account *both* for the circumstances under which they are correctly applied or used *and* the appropriate consequences of their application (Cf. Brandom, 1994, p. 117).

I think the same strategy can be applied to implicit conceptions that lie outside the logical or mathematical domain, i.e., that understanding-based capacities implicitly involve a practical inferential commitment even in the case of empirical concepts that are mainly used in perception and observational reports. To say this, however, is not much of a criticism, as Peacocke himself acknowledges that the possession of those concepts may be explained in terms of conceptual-roles as long as they are characterized in psychofunctionalist terms and adds that '[n]othing I have said tells against psycho-conceptual-role theories of meaning and content' (p. 20 of manuscript). Now, the central point of my argument is that nothing of what Peacocke has said tells against personal-level conceptual role theories either. As a result, it seems hard to discern any residual deep difference between a conceptual-role characterization of implicit conceptions—both at the personal and subpersonal level—and the one that Peacocke is now defending. But, of course, it might just be that the reason the difference seems elusive is that I still possess only an implicit conception of implicit conceptions.

## References

- Brandom, R. (1994) *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Dummett, M. (1973) *Frege's Philosophy of Language*, New York: Harper and Row.



Sellars, W. S. (1963) "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind".  
Reprinted in *Science, Perception and Reality*, London:  
Routledge & Kegan Paul.