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Title: Which concepts should we posit?

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Although theorists disagree about the details of how a theory of concepts should look, I want to point out that there is actually some agreement about two important issues. Firstly, theorists tend to agree that a productive way to model human thought is to imagine it as being made up out of cohesive parts. We assume that these parts have properties that allow them to play certain roles in cognitive processes, such as categorisation and/or thinking about an entity 'as such'. The term "concept" refers to whatever these parts turn out to be. Secondly, theorists also tend to agree, albeit to a lesser extent, that the words of a natural language stand in a reliable correspondence with these parts. So, however many concepts we have, we will at least have a DOG concept; a MOON concept; a JUSTICE concept, and so on.

In this talk, I argue that we should reject the second proposal. We should not assume that the words of a natural language reliably pick out basic elements of a theory of concepts. Many commentators have noted that 'concrete' concepts (e.g. DOG) are easier to incorporate into our theories of concept representation, learning, and application than 'abstract' concepts (e.g. JUSTICE). I suggest that the reason that it has proved so difficult to incorporate some proposed abstract concepts is that they aren't capable of having the properties we want to ascribe to concepts in the first place. Taking JUSTICE as an example, I show through a couple of thought experiments that some proposed abstract concepts are explanatorily vacuous. Positing JUSTICE does not actually help us to explain the human behaviour and cognitive processes that might motivate a use of the word "justice". Instead, we should posit other concepts which are not well-characterised by single lexemes of English. On the other hand, in order to explain, say, our ability to recognise that there is a dog in the room, positing a DOG concept seems to work well. I think this suggests that although we might have a DOG concept, we probably don't have a JUSTICE concept. Furthermore, the same strategy could be used to rule out other bad candidates for concept-hood. I suspect that these bad candidates will tend to come from the set of alleged concepts assumed to be 'abstract'.

I end the talk by considering some implications of this conclusion. Firstly, far from being a negative conclusion, I think the result is positive. It is generally accepted that 'abstract concepts' are not well understood, to put it lightly. But if I'm right then perhaps this problem becomes more tractable, because we would have less of these troublesome concepts to worry about. Secondly, the position I sketch here suggests that with respect to concepts, the concrete-abstract distinction is not as useful as it is generally thought to be.