

Contextualism, Instantiated Concepts, and Non-Representationality

In philosophy of mind *contextualism* is one of the main approaches regarding the degree of contextual dependence of concepts, according to which concepts are construed as created on the fly on each occasion of use (Barsalou 1983; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Prinz 2002). One distinctive contextualist thesis is that concepts need to be *instantiated* (Barsalou 1983; Casasanto and Lupyan 2015), namely, specifically produced for each particular context.

My thesis will be that instantiated concepts should be viewed as the result of cognitive processes, not in the sense of *products* –or persistent psychological entities stored in mental structures–, but in the sense of *phenomena* –as that which happens when something is categorized under that concept–. On this basis I will argue that instantiated concepts are non-persistent, and that that is the reason why they cannot be considered representations of their associated categories.

(INSTANTIATED) CONCEPTS ARE NON-PERSISTENT

The product/phenomenon distinction becomes clearer in examples outside the field of cognition. Thus, an algorithm which computed the square of a number and stored it within a memory register would be a process whose result is a *product* –i.e. the physical state of a set of transistors–. By contrast, a controller system which received a temperature level from a thermal sensor and emitted a flash of light when a threshold is surpassed, would be a process whose result is a *phenomenon* –millisecond photon emission–. While *products* are persistent results which may be «accessed» in future time, *phenomena* are non-persistent, and cannot be contrasted beyond their occurrence time.

Instantiated concepts are the result of mental processes of the second kind (that is, they are phenomena), which build them for each occasion-specific context. Therefore, the same way as the light signal emitted by the controller, (instantiated) concepts are non-persistent, and only «exist» in the moment when its instantiation process ends (because, after such an instant, context changes and the instantiated concept would be another). Hence, they should be identified, not with psychological states or entities, but with mental events.

(INSTANTIATED) CONCEPTS ARE NOT REPRESENTATIONS

One dominant view in cognitive science is that concepts are mental representations, i.e. particulars with semantic properties (Margolis and Laurence 2007; Pitt 2017). In regard to this, one of the two requirements that any cognitive theory demands of the notion of representation is persistence. Based on it, a distinction can be drawn between: (a) *representations*: relatively stable and persistent objects which codify information; and (b) *processes*: operations which involve and change those objects (Danks 2014). According to this, instantiated concepts would not be representations, because they are (context-specific) non-persistent mental events and, by virtue of this, they cannot codify stable information.

However, it might be argued that, even though instantiated concepts should not be identified with mental representations, maybe such identification is possible for

the information stably stored in the mind about those categories –i.e. *stored concepts*–. Nevertheless, the usual notion of concept is that which intervenes in processes of categorization, inference, communication, etc., and those are the *instantiated concepts*.

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