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Some Critical Remarks on an Explanation of Concept Possession

Eleonora Orlando

There are three aspects of George Bealer's theory of concept possession that I want to focus on in my paper: the role played by intuition, the relation between intuition and *a priori* knowledge and the problem of holism. Although, these three aspects are closely interrelated in the theory under consideration, I'll examine them separately, for the sake of clarity.

1 The Role of Intuition

As is obvious, intuition plays a central role in Bealer's theory. Simplifying his definition, we may say that understanding a concept amounts to having a truth-tracking ability based on intuition. The capacity for intuition that is at stake is understood in terms of intellectual seeming. Besides, it is worth pointing out that the theory is not presented as a theory of concepts but as a theory of concept possession. In my view, this is based on Bealer's metaphysical

assumptions, according to which concepts, as well as thoughts or propositions, are conceived of as entities that exist objectively (*ante rem*); concepts are not thus psychological or linguistic entities but parts of objective thoughts; in other words, Bealer considers himself to belong to the Fregean tradition. Consistently, he is interested in explaining not the nature of concepts themselves, which should be taken to be whatever it is for Platonic kind of entities, but the nature of our epistemic relation to concepts. It is to play the last role that the above mentioned intuitive capacity is brought into the picture.

With regard to this, my critical strategy will be the following one. First of all, I will question the relation between intuition and truth. Secondly, I will point to the fact that Bealer does not give us any argument for the thesis that it is intuition rather than belief that plays a truth-tracking role. Finally, I will argue that he does not give us reasons either to think that his intuition-based theory is to be preferred to those ones based on causal relations.

First things first. According to what is suggested by Bealer himself, the theory may be interpreted as a special kind of conceptual-role theory: the state of possessing a certain concept is determined not by its role in the belief network but by its role in the intuition network. However, there is an important difference between the theory at stake and the more typical conceptual-role theories: on the one hand, the latter are conceived of not only as theories of concept possession but mainly as theories of concepts themselves; on the other hand, whereas in the latter belief and truth come definitely apart (they serve to characterize two different aspects of conceptual content), in Bealer's theory intuition is considered a truth-tracking epistemic capacity. Now, my point is that there is no explanation of why this is the case; in other words, there is no explanation of why a person's intuitions should be taken to track the truth about the content of the concepts she/he determinately possesses. In virtue of what does determinate possession of certain concepts ensure an intuitive correlation between a person and certain true propositions that serve to delimit the concepts in question? In simpler words, why trusting our intuitions, when we are not supposed to trust any of our epistemic capacities? Why giving this truth-tracking, central role to intuitions? There does not seem to be any justification for this, specially in the light of Bealer's definition of "intuition" in terms of intellectual *seemings*. Moreover, it should be taken into account that the assimilation of an epistemic capacity such as intuition to truth has usually characterized the so-called "epistemic" conceptions of truth, which are far away from

the above mentioned Fregean tradition that Bealer takes himself to represent.¹

As far as the case against belief is concerned, it seems to me that the central role is denied to belief by fiat or stipulation. In terms of Bealer's own example, intuitions are taken to be about thoughts like "The concept of water is the concept of a stuff", namely, those which predicate a categorial part of a concept; whereas, beliefs are taken to be about thoughts like "The concept of water is the concept of H₂O", namely, those which predicate a noncategorial part of it.

With regard to this, I would like to say, first, that I do not see the basis for this sort of division of labor between intuitions and beliefs: why are certain thoughts supposed to be the object of intuition and certain others the object of belief? In particular, why can't beliefs play the role of intuitions? Or, in other words, what is peculiar to categorial parts of concepts that make them the object of intuition—rather than belief? In general, beliefs are more likely to bear truth than intuitions: they are more plastic and capable of change, under the influence of experience or argument (as acknowledged by Bealer himself). (Consider, for instance, the naïve truth schema T mentioned by Bealer in his paper: "I intuit the naive truth schema T but don't believe it" (p. 271); we may add, "because it is not true".) If the purpose is the one of tracking truth, belief seems to be the obvious candidate for the job.

Secondly, and more importantly, if we grant Bealer's point, namely, that intuitions have a truth-tracking role only with regard

¹Moreover, something similar may be said with regard to his replacement of an indefinite set of intuitions by an intuition-driven process leading to an *a priori* stable answer (to whether *p* is true or not):

- (a) Why supposing that by repeatedly systematizing different levels of intuitions we will arrive to a single answer (to whether *p* is true or not)? The notion of a single, *a priori* stable answer seems to me to be a complete idealization.
- (b) To keep its intuitive character, the intuition-driven process should avoid, at every step, analysis and deduction. I am not sure that this is what Bealer has in mind when talking of systematization.
- (c) Suppose that a certain *x* does not have any intuition to begin with, how can she get into the whole process? There is nothing for her to systematize! And we may think that no cognitive improvement would change the initial situation as far as the presence of intuitions is concerned: there is no reason to think that a cognitive improvement has to be accompanied by an intuitive one.

to categorial parts of concepts, it is not clear to me why they are to be considered to play an essential role in a *general* theory of concept possession: given the empirical character of most of our concepts (like the above mentioned concept of water), noncategorial mastery seems to be essential. In general, for most concepts, *a priori* intuitions of the concept-identities alluded to by Bealer do not seem to serve to explain what possessing a certain concept amounts to, except in the meager way of contributing the information that possessing that concept implies possessing some others referred to its categorial parts —whose possession is in turn left centrally unexplained. In other words, *scientific essentialism* should be regarded not as an aspect to be accommodated at a late stage but as part of the main phenomenon to be explained. If this is so, it is not clear why belief should be taken to have a secondary role with respect to intuition.

Now, I will examine Bealer's supposed case against causal relations. At this point, I would like to address the following question: is it possible to consider that Bealer's metaphysical assumptions provide him with an implicit argument against causal accounts? At first sight, it may be thought that they do, because they afford the theory the *status* of a theory of concept possession while causal accounts are in general the core part of theories not only of concept possession but mainly of concepts themselves. However, on second thought, it may be objected that a theory of concept possession that says very little on the nature of concepts themselves does not go far enough. In other words, it may be considered that any epistemological explanation of how we are related to concepts has to be supplemented with an ontological explanation of what those concepts are. From this perspective, Bealer may be thought to say way too little on the last question, namely, just that concepts are objective entities.² More specifically, he may be considered to owe us an explanation of what concepts themselves are *made of* (representational properties? inferential relations?) on pain of depriving them of content. In other words, even if we grant him his metaphysics of concepts and his consequent claim that we are *intuitively* related to them, an account is needed of how, in so being, we are able to think about something. As Bealer himself would agree, intuitions can be granted to play an

²In support of this, it is worth mentioning that even Frege has said something not only about the relation between words and senses but also about the relation between senses and referents; in better words, the Fregean theory of understanding that is usually associated with the (properly) Fregean theory of meaning explains not only how we grasp senses but also how by grasping senses we come to refer to objects —by saying that senses determine referents—.

evidential or epistemic role but not a constitutive or ontological one; so, it may seem that a major part of the problem cannot be handled by the theory. It is exactly at this point where, given the truth of scientific essentialism, causal relations are usually thought to play a relevant role in the account of the representational factors of conceptual content.³ Consequently, Bealer does not seem to be offering any argument against causal accounts; however, he does point to a phenomenon (scientific essentialism) that seems, at least in part, to require them.

2 Intuition and Apriority

According to Bealer, on the one hand, we intuit propositions that are true *a priori*, such as “The concept of water is the concept of a stuff”; on the other hand, we believe propositions that are true *a posteriori*, such as “The concept of water is the concept of H₂O”.

Now, if Bealer wants to be considered a representative of the Fregean tradition, he should say that *a priori* true propositions are analytic. But if they are analytic, namely, true by virtue of an analysis of the meanings of their component parts, what do we need intuition for? This seems to suggest two different objections to Bealer’s claims: first, that our understanding of the propositional conceptual components is prior to our grasping the proposition as true; second, that there is no need for intuition unless some reasons are offered in support of the thesis that the capacity for analysis is an intuitive capacity.

Moreover, his bringing intuition into the picture may make us think of Bealer as belonging not to the Fregean tradition but to the Kantian tradition, according to which *a priori* true propositions based on intuition are not analytic but synthetic. As is known, Kant’s point is that the truth of such propositions cannot be stated on the pure basis of analysis: we need an external element, namely, intuition, which counts on a very precise definition in the Kantian system (i.e., a structure of the sensibility of the transcendental subject). However, none of this can be found in Bealer’s paper. Furthermore, I think that none of this can be expected to be found

³At this point, it must be said that even the typical, belief-based conceptual role theories are, in principle, more explanatory than Bealer’s atypical, intuition-based theory, since the former are meant to account not only for our epistemic relation to concepts but also for concepts themselves. How well they fare in comparison with causal accounts is another question.

there, since I seriously doubt that conceptual realism can be made compatible with an *a priori* synthesis; it seems to me that the last one can only make sense in relation to subjective capacities (which are not part of the realistic landscape).

Summarizing, my point is that Bealer's tie of intuition to *a priori* knowledge of truth is obscure; more specifically, there seems to be no point in bringing in intuitions to account for *a priori* knowledge of truth within the theoretical framework of the Fregean tradition; aside from that, it may lead us to think that he is obscurely talking of intuition in the more substantive sense of the Kantian tradition.

3 The Holism Threat

In this final section, I want to briefly address the problem of holism, which could be introduced by means of the following question: how many other concepts do we have to possess in order to possess a certain concept? As is known, the holistic answer is *all* of them, since the content of a particular concept is thought to be determined by its relations to any other concept in a system. The atomistic answer is *none*, since the content of a particular concept is regarded as independent of its relations to the rest. In between, we have the spectrum of molecularistic answers, according to which *some* other concepts are needed, in relation to which the content of a particular concept is defined.

Bealer's theory seems to belong to the third category, since he claims that determinate possession of a concept requires having truth-tracking intuitions with regard to *certain* concept-identities (and, if it is an empirical concept, truth-tracking beliefs with regard to *certain* others). Insofar, it involves a problem that is typical of all molecularistic positions: how to delimit the required knowledge? Exactly how many concept-identities must be epistemically accessed for the subject to be taken to possess the concept in question? In other words, which is the line that keeps the theory away from holism?

Bealer acknowledges the problem and proposes a labor-saving device. From my point of view, this does not solve the molecularist's problem: what is needed is a general criterion that allows us to distinguish, in each particular case, constitutive from non-constitutive concepts. (It is worth noticing that an alternative path would be arguing that no criterion is needed, as in Devitt 1996.⁴) To put it in

⁴Cf. Devitt, Michael. *Coming to Our Senses: A Program for Semantic Localism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), specially ch. 3.

terms of Bealer's theory, we need a way of delimiting which propositions we need to have the truth-tracking ability for in order for us to possess a certain concept. (Given Bealer's explicit desire to avoid the analytic-synthetic distinction, I take it that his categorial-non categorial one cannot be considered to do the job; setting this aside, it must be pointed out that the distinctions in question look very similar to each other.⁵) Until we state that criterion—or we somehow justify the idea that no criterion is needed—, we'll be under the holism threat: all concepts may be relevant to the understanding of any particular one. I am not saying that this is true—I think it is not even plausible—or unanswerable: my claim is that Bealer has proposed a nonatomistic theory without giving us a clue as to how this nonatomism is to be distinguished from holism. Nonatomism need not be holism; as we have seen, it may be just molecularism; however, if we are worried about holism, the molecularist character of the theory has to be justified. Far from doing that, the way Bealer has chosen to deal with the problem in offering the above mentioned labor-saving device seems to be only a way of stating it.

In connection with this, I would like to discuss a certain aspect of Bealer's molecularism that makes me doubt. It is not implausible to think that there are some concepts for which Kripke's objections based on the arguments from ignorance and error do hold. According to this, it may be thought that understanding certain concepts is compatible with the existence of some gaps and errors as to which objects they apply to (even if not with total ignorance or complete error, to soften up Kripke's original thesis).^{6,7} In the light of this,

⁵To take one of Bealer's own examples, exactly how many true concept-identities—such as "The concept of being a triangle is the concept of being a polygon" and "The concept of being a cylinder is not the concept of being a polygon"—do we need to be able to track so as to be considered to determinately possess or understand the concept of being a polygon? Bealer's proposal suggests that quite a lot, since, according to him, we need to be able to recognize all the objects to which the term "polygon" applies (no gaps) and just them (no errors). What is not at all clear is which ones those concept-identities are or what criterion is used to pick them out.

⁶To take a simple example, it may be thought that understanding the concept of water is compatible with not knowing that water is translucent (because the person may not have the concept of translucency) and with thinking that vapor is water (which would be false if we assumed that water is a liquid stuff). To take another example, a person could be in the following situation: (a) she/he understands the target concept, namely, the concept of fish; (b) she/he understands the test concept, namely, the concept of whale; but (c) she/he cannot answer the question whether whales are fishes or she/he gives a wrong answer.

⁷With regard to the thesis that attributions on the part of third-person inter-

Bealer's equation of understanding with full possession seems to be too restrictive: understanding a concept may not necessarily involve knowledge (either intuitive or credential) of all the characteristics of the entity to which the concept applies (no gaps) and no mistakes about it (no errors). If we allow for Kripke's objections, understanding seems to be perfectly compatible with what Bealer calls "weak" or "nominal" possession.

In accordance with the previous considerations, I would say that I am not sure whether it is legitimate to pose a general question and to look for a general answer with regard to the phenomenon of concept understanding. I tend to think that the explanation of what understanding a concept consists of will vary from certain kinds of concepts to others —just as, in certain theories of reference, the explanation of reference varies from, let's say, proper names to general and artifactual terms. To put an example, I do not see any reason to expect that (the state of) understanding the concept of red and (the one of) understanding the concept of sloop should have the same underlying structure: it may well be the case that an atomistic account applies to the first case while the second requires a molecularistic one. Likewise, the restrictions that Bealer imposes on full possession (no gaps and no errors) may be plausibly taken to hold just for mathematical and logical concepts.

preters do not involve understanding (or full possession), it must be said that it sounds strange in a realist's mouth. Why should there be an asymmetry as far as the ontological commitment is concerned between third-person attributions and first-person ones?