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Putting Conceptual Abilities in an Evolutionary Perspective: Reflections on Merlin Donald's Work on Cognitive Evolution in Light of Theories of Concepts

Concepts allow an agent to step back from strict experience-in-the-moment to take a wider view, to see the present moment and context in the light of previous ones and others yet to come. Theories of concepts attempt to determine their essential nature and properties as units of structured thought. Amid all the ongoing debates over concepts, their evolution within the species (phylogeny) has often been neglected in favor of their development within the individual conceptual agent (ontogeny) -- when such issues are considered at all. One consequence has been a tendency to equate concepts with words of a language, to conflate conceptual abilities with linguistic ones. That means denying concepts of any kind to non-human animals. Another has been a tendency to take conceptual abilities as an all-or-nothing affair.

A proper understanding of conceptual evolution is necessary to a proper understanding both of how human and non-human conceptual abilities exist along a continuum and how they differ. It is necessary as well to understanding how language pulls apart from concepts, so that conceptual abilities precede and make possible linguistic abilities, while linguistic abilities transform our conceptual abilities rather than making them possible in the first place. Merlin Donald's four stages of cognitive-cultural development -- episodic, mimetic, mythic and theoretic -- provide a suitable framework on which to begin this important discussion, by showing how each stage transforms and extends the conceptual abilities already in place. This paper takes Donald's general framework for cognition and applies it more narrowly to conceptual cognition, within the framework of Peter Gärdenfors' conceptual spaces theory of concepts and the philosophical school known as enactivism.

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