

Recognitional Concepts and the Compositionality of Concept Possession*

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1. Let me begin by reconstructing Fodor's argument, as I understand it. Premise P1 in the following argument is my reconstruction of Fodor's premise P. For me, the core argument is clearer if we dispense with talk of "inheritance," and with talk of states, capacities, and dispositions as "satisfiers" for a concept. The core idea involved in Premise P seems to be this: In order for a person to satisfy the possession conditions for a complex concept C, it is necessary and sufficient that the person satisfy the possession conditions for C's constituent concepts and also satisfy the possession conditions for C's mode of composition. (The rationale for this is that otherwise, the usual account of productivity fails.) I find it clearer to reformulate the Premise P as an expression of this idea—and to reconstruct the overall argument accordingly. So here's my reconstruction:

*I thank David Henderson, Michael Lynch, Matjaz Potrc, John Tienson, and Mark Timmons for helpful discussion and comments in a reading group on Jerry Fodor's recent work on concepts.

- P1. One satisfies the possession conditions for a complex concept *C* iff: (i) one satisfies the possession conditions for each of *C*'s constituent concepts, and (ii) one satisfies the possession conditions for *C*'s mode of composition.
- C1. If the possession conditions for PET include the capacity to recognize good instances of PET, and the possession conditions for FISH include the capacity to recognize good instances of FISH, then the possession conditions for PET FISH include the capacity to recognize good instances of PET FISH. [From P1.]
- P2. The possession conditions for PET FISH do not include the capacity to recognize good instances of PET FISH.
- C2. It's not the case that both (i) the possession conditions for PET include the capacity to recognize good instances of PET, and (ii) the possession conditions for FISH include the capacity to recognize good instances of FISH. *I.e.*, it's not the case that both PET and FISH are recognitional concepts. [From C1 and P2]
- P3. Either PET and FISH are both recognitional concepts, or neither is.
- C3. PET is not a recognitional concept. [From C2 and P3.]
- P4. For every putative recognitional concept *C*, there is another putative recognitional concept *C** such that the preceding argument for C3 applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to *C* and *C**.
- C4. There are no recognitional concepts. [From P4 and the argument for C3.]

2. I turn now from exposition to commentary. First, someone might claim that only one of the concepts PET and FISH are recognitional, and that this fact alone suffices to explain why PET FISH is not recognitional. More generally, someone might claim that whenever a complex concept fails to be recognitional, at least one of its constituent concepts is not recognitional. I won't pursue this line of thought here, but I note it for the record.

Second, the argument is not valid. Conclusion C1 does not follow from the principal premise P1, because P1 does not imply that for every cognitive capacity included in the possession conditions of all the constituent concepts, the possession conditions for the complex concept must include a matching cognitive capacity involving the complex concept itself. Thus, P1 does not exclude the possibility

that the possession conditions for a complex concept's mode of composition work in such a way that the property *being recognitional* does not "transfer" to the possession conditions of a complex concept from the possession conditions of its constituent concepts. To make the argument valid, Fodor would need to fill this logical lacuna with a suitable additional premise, and would need to defend that premise.

Now, in effect Fodor addresses this logical hole in the argument when he discusses the third objection he considers. Here's the objection, in his words: "Couldn't we just split the difference? Couldn't we just say that the satisfiers for the *primitive* concepts include recognitional capacities, even though the satisfiers for complex concepts don't?" (p. 8). The core of his reply is this:

Simply not credible. If one's grasp of PET FISH isn't constituted by one's ability to recognize its instances, then, surely, one's grasp of FISH isn't constituted by one's ability to recognize *its* instances. And vice versa: if recognizing good instances like goldfish isn't a satisfier for the concept PET FISH, then recognizing good instances like (as it might be) trout, isn't a satisfier for the concept FISH. Surely, being able to recognize goldfish as pet fish must stand in *precisely* the same relation to having the concept PET FISH that being able to recognize trout as fish stands in to having the concept FISH. So, how could that relation be constitutive of concept possession in the one case but not in the other? (p. 8)

I have several preliminary comments about this reply, and then I'll turn to my main comment and some considerations it prompts. First, the claims in which the term 'surely' occurs are question-begging in this dialectical context. Someone who claims that PET and FISH are recognitional concepts, but who holds that recognitionality does not transfer from recognitional concepts to complex concepts of which they are the constituents, will deny these very claims.

Second, the plausibility of the claims in which the term 'surely' occurs seems to depend in part on the fact that it's somewhat dubious whether concepts like PET and FISH really *are* recognitional concepts. Concepts like RED seem like more plausible candidates for this status.

Third, in the quoted passage Fodor talks about whether or not the ability to recognize good instances *constitutes* a given concept, rather than talking about whether or not that ability *partially* constitutes the concept. This rhetorical move is important to notice, because (a) someone who holds that a given concept is recognitional is only committed to saying that the ability to recognize good instances

is *part* of the possession conditions for the concept, and (b) the fact that there might be other conditions too is potentially relevant to whether or not the property *being recognitional* transfers from primitive constituent concepts to complex concepts. (Claim (a) is evidently built into the notion of a recognitional concept, as Fodor characterizes it; see clause (2) of his definition at the beginning of the paper.)

Fourth, in the quoted passage Fodor slides back and forth between talk of the ability to recognize *instances*, and talk of the ability to recognize *good* instances. This rhetorical move is worth noticing too, because (a) someone who holds that a given concept is recognitional is only committed to holding that the ability to recognize *good* instances is among the concept's possession conditions, and yet (b) the statements containing 'surely' in the above passage gain at least some of their air of plausibility from the fact that they trade on 'instance' rather than 'good instance'.

Fifth, in the quoted passage—and throughout the paper—Fodor under-emphasizes the role played by the possession conditions for a complex concept's *mode of composition*. When one keeps that role clearly in mind, it is easier to have doubts about whether the property *being recognitional* transfers from primitive concepts to complex concepts of which they are constituents.

In the end, though, it seems to me that none of these preliminary remarks matters very much. The crucial part of the passage lately quoted (and this is my principal comment on it) comes in the final sentence, where Fodor throws down a *challenge* to the fan of recognitional concepts, viz.: *How could recognitionality be constitutive of certain primitive concepts but not constitutive of complex concepts composed from them, given that concept possession is compositional in a way that makes it productive?* The passage raises this challenge, and the rhetorical force of the passage is to suggest that the fan of recognitional concepts has very little chance of being able to meet the challenge.

3. Let me now say something about how this challenge might be addressed, by someone who holds that although the possession conditions for certain concepts include the capacity to recognize good instances of the concept, this feature doesn't transfer to complex concepts of which the recognitional concepts are constituents. For concreteness, suppose that this hypothetical fan of recognitional concepts holds that PET and FISH are recognitional concepts, but that PET FISH is not one. (As I said earlier, concepts like RED seem like more plausible candidates for being recognitional than do PET or FISH. But leave that aside for now.)

The general idea involves two principal elements. First, articulate possession conditions for recognitional concepts in a way that incorporates something more than —something in addition to— the ability to recognize good instances of the concept. Second, articulate possession conditions for the *modes of composition* of complex concepts in a way that (i) draws upon these additional possession conditions for the constituent concepts, and (ii) does so in such a manner that the property *being recognitional* does not transfer from the constituent concepts to the complex concept.

Concerning the first element: A fan of recognitional concepts could say that the possession conditions for a recognitional concept include not only the ability to recognize good instances, but also the disposition to apply the concept to things by taking them to be *sufficiently relevantly similar* to good instances of that concept. This latter capacity involves some kind of “similarity metric” that is employed in applying the concept, a metric that is specific to the given concept (or perhaps to a genus-concept of which the given concept is a species). So the idea is that when one classifies something as a fish, one does so by taking the thing to be sufficiently relevantly similar to good, prototypical, instances of FISH. Likewise, when one classifies something as a pet, one does so by taking the thing to be sufficiently relevantly similar to good, prototypical, instances of PET.

Concerning the second element: Consider the complex concept PET FISH. Three factors are in play here: the concept PET, the concept FISH, and the relevant mode of combination —call it the *conjunctive* mode of combination. Plausibly, the possession conditions for the conjunctive mode of concept combination will involve cognitive dispositions of this sort: one will classify something as an instance of PET FISH by (i) taking it to be sufficiently relevantly similar to prototypical instances of PET, *and* (ii) taking it to be sufficiently relevantly similar to prototypical instances of FISH. (For some modes of combination, things can get more complicated. In the case of RED HAIR, for instance, the possession conditions presumably include this disposition: one will classify something as an instance of RED HAIR only if one takes it to be sufficiently relevantly similar, *for an instance of HAIR*, to prototypical instances of RED.)

Admittedly, the story as so far described is very sketchy indeed. Obvious worries arise about whether it can be carried through in adequate detail. In particular, it might or might not be possible to produce a detailed and workable theoretical account of how the concept-specific similarity metric works psychologically. There are also worries about whether this notion will turn out to be vitiatingly cir-

cular —that the only satisfactory way to explain what the similarity metric for PET is would be by appeal to the individual's prior, up-and-running, possession of the concept PET. In addition, theoretical problems certainly could arise (and *have* arisen in the psychological literature) in attempting to work out a suitable account of concept composition, especially in a way that is sufficiently general with respect to the kinds of concepts and the kinds of concept-combination that would need to be considered. But it's not obvious —not to me, anyway— that such problems couldn't be surmounted by some specific way of filling in the details theoretically.

Suppose, then, that the sketchy two-part story I've been telling can be elaborated in an adequate way. Well then, we thereby have an answer to Fodor's challenge to explain how the ability to recognize good instances could be part of the possession conditions for PET and for FISH but not part of the possession conditions for PET FISH. Explanation: The above-described possession conditions for the conjunctive mode of concept combination, together with the above-described possession conditions for PET and for FISH, just don't entail that someone who satisfies the possession conditions for PET FISH has the ability to recognize good instances of PET FISH —even though the stated possession conditions for PET and for FISH *do* include the ability to recognize good instances of those concepts.

And that's as it should be. For, what counts as a *good* instance of PET FISH depends on more than what is knowable just by virtue of being a competent user of this concept. A competent user does know, tacitly anyway, that something is an instance of PET FISH just in case (i) it is sufficiently relevantly similar to prototypical pets, and (ii) it is sufficiently relevantly similar to prototypical fish. But which kinds of fish are *good* instances of PET FISH is something that depends on additional facts about the world —in particular, what kinds of fish are typically used as pets, and what kinds are not.

Let me add that nothing I have said here should be taken to indicate that I actually *believe* the sort of story about concept-possession I have been sketching, or that I actually believe that there are recognitional concepts. I don't have developed opinions on these matters. I have been explaining why it seems to me, as someone who is agnostic on the issues, that Fodor's argument against recognitional concepts is not persuasive.

4. Even so, the question remains whether there is any good reason to believe in recognitional concepts. Speaking for myself, concepts like PET and FISH don't seem like especially credible cases. For, I don't really see why one couldn't learn these concepts *by description*,

so to speak, without thereby acquiring the ability to recognize good instances when confronted with them.

On the other hand, it seems to me much more plausible that concepts like RED are recognitional. Imagine someone blind from birth. Although such a person could certainly learn a lot about physics, about electromagnetic radiation of various wavelengths, about the effects of light of different wavelengths on the human visual system, about the uses of color words, etc., there remains a question whether such a person could actually acquire the concept RED. Many people, myself included, would be strongly inclined to say no. But if the answer is no, then contra Fodor, there is at least one recognitional concept, namely RED.