Ways of Concepts

In choosing >ways< in the title of this short paper I try to avoid >kinds<. For one of its points is to point out that the expression >concept< is not simply a generic concept for >*kinds of concepts<.

Wittgenstein (LW) remarks somewhere, that the expression >concept< is vague. Basically it certainly belongs in the context of classifying speech (use of language). It then signifies either the expression itself or what it is applied to. On this double meaning is it that the seeming alternative between an intensional or an extensional view of concepts turn. The intensional view focuses on the content of the expression applied, the extensional focuses on the range of entities it is (can be) applied to.[1]

Vagueness or indeterminacy of a concept LW in his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* famously discussed choosing as his example the expression >game< (sect. 66-71). There he fights a view of his only book published during his lifetime *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) which there is called the postulate[2] of determinacy of sense (cp. 3.23). With respect to concepts this view is apt to mislead to another view – that concepts not marked by sharp boundaries are not really concepts: „But is a blurred concept a concept at all?“ Against the last mentioned misleading view LW points out (for expository reasons by way of putting a question[3]) that it is not „always an advantage“ to replace a picture that is not sharp by one that is, and, more importantly, that one that isn't sharp is often just what we need. (Cp. PI sect. 71) Against the first misleading view, the demand of determinacy of sense, LW essentially holds (elaborating on 'just what we need') that open-bounded concepts are needed for making the overlap of different idiolects in communication possible. The fight against the prejudice of always needed determinay of sense also induces the conception of family-resemblance (of items under concepts) that LW invented as an alternative. This would have made it possible for him to explain the different ways of concepts as familyresemblent to one another. But he did not do so and also refrained from any other attempt at a general characterization.

1 Cp. R. Carnap: Meaning and Necessity, Chicago 2 1956, 21-3. – Carnap avoids the problem of giving a general explanation of >extension< by defining it seperately for different types of expressions via the concept of >equivalence<.

2 Ogden's translation. Because of the technical senses of >postulate< I would prefer for German >Forderung< >demand<.

3 These are related to one of his over-arching aims with his philosophy: to stimulate the own thinking of his readers. Positive views presented in questions challenge the reader to think about them himself.

I.

One therefore has reason to regret that LW, with a short exception in Lectures 1930, did not come back on the difference between formal and material concepts he had exposed in TLP (4.122-4.128). For it would have enabled him to explain the general unmodified expression >concept< as designating a formal concept itself.

Material concepts are means to classify what is given perceptually or in practical dealings with the environment. The most simple examples are in simple singular predicative propositions like „The table // is round.“ The first expression – a singular term – signifies something given (which implicitly is differentiated from other possible artefacts or other possible givens generally). The second expression – a general term – ascribes to the significatum of the first a perceptual quality (which again is implicitly contrasted to other possible salient qualities). Such propositions therefore serve the purpose of classifying-and-distinguishing.

Material concepts form hierarchies from the most general to the most specific. Take for example the expression >animal<. It is generic at least with respect plants and animals (in the more narrow sense of >speechless brutes<). >Plants< again is generic with respect to trees, bushes, flowers, grass, for instance. >Trees<, again, is generic to, at least, deciduous and coniferous trees etc.etc. In analogy to the biological distinction between genus and species general material concepts have been called generic concepts.

I do not attempt at the impossible, namely tho characterize generally levels of generality in concepts, but do point out one decisive difference between concepts of first level and all on higher ones: Concepts of first level admit of ostensive explanation generally, concepts of higher ones do not. With respect to this mark material concepts divide into those of first level and all others.

Among generic concepts there are sortal concepts and mass concepts. A sortal concept classifies given unities and comes with a criterion of identity for singular items covered by it. A mass term does not and does not come with one. For items covered by a mass term one has to use a quantifying modifier to get (however blurry) definite quantities (>a glass of water<, >a handful of sand<).

Already with rerspect to the hierarchies among material concepts the problem of whether

there is a summum genus or genus generalissimum has been discussed. >Being< was considered a candidate. In the Aristotelian tradition the question has been answered in the negative – with the help of category as a technical term. I shall discuss this further below.

II.

But before coming to >categories< some elucidations concerning formal concepts. Talk of them was an innovation of LW in TLP. He there was mainly a philosopher of logic and language and therefore explained his coinage with respect to the formal language of first order predicate calculus – with the intention, however, „to show the reason for the confusion, very widespread among philosophers, between internal relations and proper [external] relations." (4.122 c) The distinction between material or „proper" (4.1272 d) and formal concepts he therefore elucidated with respect to the (formal) concept of >object<. He explains them as expressing >variables< (4.1271-2) in analogy to the individual variable >x< of the predicate calculus. This, he claims, „is already given with an object which falls under it." (4.12721) If >object< is used, against its formal status, as a „proper" concept word „there arise senseless pseudo-propositions." An ordinary-language example would be: „*The table // is an object." To this one could react either with „Nonsense!" or with „Of course, what else it could be?" This ambivalence itself is a mark of non-sensicality. The utterance of the starred example sentence cannot tell anybody anything he does not already know. It only reflects that the formal concept is already given with the material one. The term >object<, expressing a formal concept, corresponds in ordinary language to the indefinite pronoun >something<. If the first is logically a variable, then the second is one, too.

III.

One is up to a far-reaching insight into our ordinary conceptual system as soon as one observes that it, in contra-distinction to the predicate calculus, contains another equally fundamental indefinite pronoun besides >something<, namely >somebody (someone)<. It corresponds to the substantive >person< as >something< corresponds to >object<. In using the basic distinction object/person we de facto follow the rules: „What is merely an object, is not a person; what is a person, is not merely an object."

Persons are, what already Aristotle – without forming the concept – explained them to be essentially: speaking (language using) animals (zoa logon echonta[4]). This is why I did not list them (explicitly) under the examples for >animals< above. To be in command of a propositional language is the unique mark of humans distinguishing them from all other animals (which, as far as we know, only have signal-systems).

IV.

Although LW was the first to coin the expression >formal concept<, I could have forgone the doxographical-exemplary introduction given so far by pointing out an observation concerning the most simple subject-predicate propositions. For in the use of such propositions two universal formal concepts are always given – >subject of the speech (theme)< and >content of the speech<. In the case of a singular predicative proposition the theme is, what the subject-expression refers to, the >content< is, what the predicate expression says about the theme (reference vs. meaning). >Subject of speech (theme)< is also the abstract sense of >object< as distinguished from >material object<. Everything can become theme of speech ('everything' in sensu divisu – i.e. all singular items); everything that could be understood at all i.e. would have or make sense. With the two universal formal concepts we therefore can introduce with reference und sense/meaning two of the three cardinal language-reflexive concepts. The third one, presupposed by both, should therefore at least be mentioned in passing: >truth<. Truth is a mode of correctness with respect to assertively used propositions and correctness is the formal object (the >goal<) of all serious speech.

V.

Something closely related to what could and should be meant by >formal concept< is known in philosophy at least since Aristotle treated of categories.[5] He listed ten of them: (1) substance, (2) quality, (3) quantity, (4) relation, (5) space, (6) time, (7) situation, (8) having, (9) doing, (10) suffering. After Aristotle Kant was the first to theorize about categories independently (and then again Brandom, on whom I do not comment here[6]). He accused

4 *Politics* 1253 a 14 sqq.

5 *Categories* Ch. 4.

6 Cp. R.B. Brandom: *Between Saying & Doing*, Oxford 2008. – E.M. Lange: >Grammatical Persons & Semantical

Aristotle of not having developed his list from one single principle and believed to have detected such a principle in a table of forms of judgement he thought to be complete. At least Kant's critique of Aristotle something can be made of. It is unclear whether some of Aristotle's catageories really differ from one another. As examples for (1) he names 'man; horse'. This for one thing shows that he did not realize the potential of the differentia specifica of humans he himself discovered: being in command of a propositional language and distinguished by this from all other aninmals. Moreover, he seems to have been willing to reduce animals as >substances< to mere spatially independent items. Examples for (8) are 'lies; sits', which seem to be also, as instances of (5), spatial placings of humans, or of (9) >doings<. With (9) and (10) he fundamentalizes the distinction between active and passive, which could be considered as a modification in (9) alone.

In Kant's table of judgements grammatical, logical and epistemological points of view are used without discrimination. To discuss his list in detail one would have to be in command of historical knowledge of his sources (such writers as Crusius and Baumgarten, for instance)[7], which I lack.

But I want to discuss his contention that the table of judgements, mixed as it is, can be used as a guide to a complete table of categories.[8] If categories are a group of formal concepts as LW would later have it – and, for instance, Aristotle's (1)-(6) & (9) speak for it – and their central mark should be to be given already with each of their instances, then there can be no internal criterion of completeness for categories due to (1) the universal range of the two fundamental formal concepts theme/content (of speech) and (2) to the optionality of their explicit formation (being given with each of their instances they have not to be formed explicitly). For, as will be remembered, everything making sense at all could become theme or content of speech. If one wants a criterion for completeness, it would have to be an external one from an appropriate restriction of the universe of discourse to be investigated. In this vein I have tried to identify the formal concepts of everyday's talk in my >Philosophy<[9].

Ideas< (on academia.edu)

7 For a survey cp. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Art. Urteil, III. Urteilsformen, Vol. 11, col. 455-458.

8 Cp. CPR B 95 sqq./A 70 sqq.

9 On academia.edu. This short paper should be considered an appendix to the first section of >Philosophy< dealing with its concept.

VI.

Finally concerning the problem of a summum genus as the question whether categories belong on the tops of the hierarchies of generic concepts. As mentioned before, in the Aristotelian tradition it was denied that there is one summum genus, but the plural categories were deemed to be highest generic concepts, summa genera. The reason for there not being one summum genus was that it would contain all the differences between concepts and therefore admit of contradictory concept formations. The conceptions of LW lead to a different result concerning the context of belonging of formal concepts. It was suggested to me by my colleague Jens Kulenkampff (Erlangen), who wrote to me in a mail discussing my proposals (January 14th, 2023) that formal concepts, although highly general, do not belong to the hierarchies of material concepts but somehow are coming to stand besides them. This reminded me of LW's conception of a meaning-explanation which also stands besides its explanandum and is so much on a par with it that LW maintained the equivalence of the meaning of a word and that by which it is explained.[10] The question of the status of formal concepts in relation to the problem of summa genera has this answer: Formal concepts are highest concepts of meaning-explanation. They in this sense do not belong to the hierarchies of material concepts, but with the meaning-explanations of words they come to stand besides them and belong to hierarchies of their own.

10 PI sect. 560: „The meaning of a word is what an explanation of its meaning explains."