

EXTRACTS

THE COLLECTIVE USE AND EVOLUTION OF CONCEPTS

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Each of us thinks his own thoughts; our concepts we share with our fellow-men. For what we believe we are answerable as individuals; but the language in which our beliefs are articulated is public property. To understand what concepts are, and how they play a part in our lives, we must come to terms with the central relationship between our thoughts and beliefs, which are personal or individual, and our linguistic and conceptual inheritance, which is communal.

The exercise of individual rights presupposes the existence of society, and is possible only within the framework of social institutions; and equally, we could add, the articulation of individual thoughts presupposes the existence of language, and is possible only within the framework of shared concepts. So the paradox of political freedom, as enunciated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, faces us in the epistemic field also. *Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains;*¹ yet, on closer inspection these chains turn out to be the necessary instruments of effective political freedom. Intellectually, also, Man is born with the power of original thought, and everywhere this originality is constrained within a particular conceptual inheritance; yet, on closer inspection, these concepts too turn out to be the necessary instruments of effective thought.

Individualists or anarchists will see the shared concepts which are the instruments of our thinking, and the communal language in which we express our thoughts, as shackles or constraints imposed by a tyrannous collectivity, so warping the free consciousness of the self-moved, creative individual. Collectivists will retort, with equal plausibility, that an individual's inherited concepts represent neither a prison nor a set of stocks. Rather they are an intellectual structure or platform raised above the bloody, improvident chaos of brutish existence, on which alone he can live a genuinely human life. He owes this platform to the efforts of his forefathers, and his own true creativity consists in working responsibly and effectively to improve it for his successors.

Concepts play their parts in the lives of individuals, and scarcely have any actuality apart from these roles. At the same time, individual concept-users acquire the concepts they do within a social context, and the sets of concepts which they employ play identifiable parts also in the lives of human communities—whether societies, congregations, or professions. In the intellectual as in the political sphere, an individual's initiatives—whether social or conceptual—are an expression of his personal thought about collective problems.

In intellectual affairs and in politics alike, then, even personal originality has a social or collective dimension. And, furthermore, these two roles are clearly correlative. Collective understanding is realized through the intellectual performances of individuals; the individual's understanding applies concepts taken from a communal stock, or modifies them in ways that represent potential improvements of that stock.

It remains an open question, today, exactly which features of our conceptual inheritance have a predominantly physiological or genetical basis, and which features call for explanation in predominantly cultural or educational terms. To some extent, no doubt, every aspect of collective intelligence has both physiological and cultural aspects, with different cultures representing alternative expressions of 'native capacities' spread widely, or even universally, through the human species. The capacity to create language-in-general (*langage*) thus seems to be a 'species-specific' human capacity, requiring a particular constellation of neuro-anatomical and physiological correlates; while the development of particular languages (*langues*) represents so many alternative expressions of this general human capacity. In our own generation, the task of disentangling the contributions of genetical inheritance (nature, native capacities) and of environment (nurture, enculturation) to intelligent human behaviour promises to be as tricky as the corresponding task facing our grandfathers in general physiology and medicine.

To begin with, however, our analysis of concepts, language, and collective understanding need not be hampered by this particular difficulty

We need only recognize that the conceptual abilities we exercise as adults are, primarily, those that we have inherited; and for many purposes it will not matter—within limits—just how far this inheritance is transmitted physiologically, just how far by enculturation. We may (e.g.) criticize the particular forms of life and understanding into

which we have grown up, seeking to improve on them and working beyond them to better forms; so our individual reflective thought may innovate on, modify, and eventually replace those inherited concepts. In this case, both the original concepts and their replacements will be not merely products of a cultural process but also expressions of our native capacities. Yet that duality will make no difference to the operative questions in the case: namely, what considerations play a part in conceptual innovation, and how novel conceptual variants are to be judged. For these purposes, the earlier forms of concept remain the starting-points for all subsequent innovations, and the new 'reformed' concepts will be the potential property of all our fellows quite as much as their predecessors. Neither old nor new concepts will be manifestations of universal genetical properties, or of our private experiences, alone. So we come back to the first, inescapable point. Our personal beliefs find expression only through the use of communal concepts. The new moulds in which our individual thoughts are cast acquire a definite form only when they become—at any rate, potentially—the collective intellectual instruments of an appropriate community.

Like concepts, institutions find expression both through verbal appeals to certain symbolic words and principles, and also through practical conformity to certain established procedures. We could thus speak of (say) the Divine Right of Kings as a political 'concept' which, at one and the same time, symbolized the institution of Absolute Monarchy and found behavioural expression through an authoritarian pattern of political procedures; and likewise—for better or for worse—in the case of other social and political 'concepts', such as the Rule of Law, White Supremacy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Just as the fully-fledged acceptance of a scientific concept (e.g. 'energy') commits one not merely to the symbolic employment of certain technical terms and forms of calculation, but to their practical use within the explanatory procedures of the science concerned, so too it can be helpful to describe current authoritative patterns of social, political, or judicial behaviour as the practical expressions of some collective 'concept'.

With these examples in mind, we could invert our earlier epigram, *Concepts are Micro-institutions*.

So,
now, we might declare that *Institutions are Macro-concepts*. Like concepts, institutions find behavioural expression through changing constellations of 'standard operating procedures'. They preserve their self-identity through change by selective innovation in response to changing situations, in the name of collective social goals, and in this, too, they display an unremarked parallel to concepts and conceptual evolution. So regarded, indeed, the historical evolution of social institutions would simply become the process of conceptual evolution writ large.