

Representations reclaimed: Accounting for the co-emergence of concepts and experience

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Abstract. Understanding the relationship between concepts and experience seems necessary to specifying the content of experience, yet current theories of concepts do not seem up to the job. With Peter Gärdenfors’s conceptual spaces theory as a foundation and with enactivist philosophy as inspiration, we present a proposed extension to conceptual spaces theory and use it to outline a model of the emergence of concepts and experience. We conclude that neither is ultimately primary but each gives rise to the other: i.e., that they co-emerge. Such a model can then serve as the anchor to a theory of concepts more generally. Concepts are most naturally understood in symbolic and representational terms, while much of experience, in contrast, is non-symbolic and non-representational; yet the conflict between the two will, herein, be shown to be more apparent than real. The main contribution of this paper is to argue for, by means of this account of co-emergence, a continuum between “low-level” mental content that is more appropriately understood in highly context-sensitive and directly sensorimotor-based terms, and “high-level” mental content that is more appropriately understood in context-free and representational or symbolic terms. In doing so we conclude that the extreme positions of representationalism and anti-representationalism are fatally flawed.

Keywords: concept, conceptual spaces, enaction, mental representation, representation, sensorimotor, sensorimotor profile, symbol