

CONCEPT-FORMATION ACCORDING TO RAND A PERSONAL ADAPTATION (AND TWO EXTRA PHASES)

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I INTRODUCTION

In her «Introduction to Objectivist epistemology» (1990) Ayn Rand shows us how concepts are formed. She identifies three stages: the sensorial, the perceptual and the conceptual stage. Sensations are stimuli impinging on the senses that cannot be retained by man's memory, nor can be experienced in pure isolation. They are always experienced together with other sensations in the automatically integrated whole that she calls percepts. This automatic integration is performed by our subconsciousness. The last step is a conscious, volitional integration of these percepts by our focused consciousness, yielding concepts.

Her description of the process (p. 6) makes notice of the first stage as being aware of objects, to which she ascribes the concept «entity», followed by the «closely allied» stage in which a child detects «specific, particular things» to which she ascribes the concept «identity». She then goes on by ascribing the concept «unit» to the third stage, in which objects with similar traits are grouped, and abstracted by their essential, distinguishing characteristic.

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This seems a pretty lucid description of how things are, but I take issue with the claim that on the sensorial level (the stage where the experiences are still that of a disintegrated chaos of stimuli) the child is aware of «objects». I would rather say it has awareness of an external reality, and nothing more. Awareness of specific objects comes later, in the perceptual stage, and only then one can speak of the awareness of «entities», not earlier. Nevertheless, Rand does speak of entities as belonging to the sensorial fase: «the first stage is a child's awareness of objects, of things —which represents the (implicit) concept "entity"». I think this is wrong.

I also disagree with her notion that the concept of «identity» only arises in the second stage. The concept as such, as the explicit identification of the fact that things have identity, is a highly philosophical matter, which I would certainly not ascribe to the second stage of concept-formation, but only much, much later. However, if identity is conceived as the relationship between a certain thing and a consciousness conceptualising that thing, it must be implicit in all three stages. One cannot claim to have a sensation without something external to the mind having caused it, nor can one claim to have a sensation without the mind experiencing it. Identity is in the relation between the two.

II

THE STAGES OF CONCEPT-FORMATION

What follows is an adaptation of her theory, using the same lines of thinking, but replacing «awareness of objects» by «awareness of an external reality», linking «entities» not to the sensorial stage, but to the perceptual stage, and assuming that identity is an implicit relationship between existence and consciousness, to be found in all stages.

- a) Implicit in every concept (and even in every percept and sensation) is the awareness of an external reality. Even before a child knows that things exist, as being separate from other things, it experiences how at least something (and not some ... thing) impinges on his senses. In this stage, there is no abstraction. The

- main activity of the brain consists in trying to connect the perceived sensations into shapes. The moment where a contrast between a shape and its background is experienced, things get discerned from one another. That is where stage two begins.
- b) Stage two is the stage of perception, which is not the same as conscious, conceptual identification. Perception is the subconscious awareness of the fact that objects exist, without knowing their specific attributes: being aware that something exists, is not the same as knowing how something exists, what its specificities are. The activity of the brain still largely consists in discerning objects from one another. The moment where similarities are discovered between those objects, enabling the subject to group them according to a distinguishing feature, is where stage three begins.
 - c) The conceptual stage is the stage where entities are being abstracted by retaining the essential, fundamental characteristic, while omitting all accidental, non-fundamental characteristics. The result is a concept: a mental integration of two or more units possessing the same distinguishing characteristic(s), with their particular measurements omitted. The omittance of these non-fundamental characteristics does not mean that they cease to exist in a metaphysical way. They are only disregarded when forming the concept.

This description of the process of concept-formations seems more accurate to me: sensations as the primary awareness of an external reality, not of entities, perceptions as the awareness of the mere existence of these entities, without further specifications, and conceptions as knowledge about specificities that go beyond the awareness of the mere existence of things, distinguished from one another.

III TWO MORE STAGES

As of present, I am investigating two more stages of conceptualization, which Rand did not even mention: the philosophical stage, and the transcendental stage:

- d) Stage four is the stage of philosophy, in which the abstraction of concepts reaches its upper limit. After having abstracted sensations into percepts and percepts into concepts, the mind arrives at the point where it has abstracted all accidental features of all things, and only two fundamental concepts remain: shape and space.

In this stage, the brain is able to put every new object —be it a mental one or a physical one— into one of these two classes. In doing so, it arrives at the point where it starts wondering in which class it has to categorize itself. The moment where the mind blocks in trying to solve this conundrum, is where stage five begins.

- e) Stage five is the transcendental stage, in which no act of abstraction is necessary or useful. The mind can only solve the logical problem of trying to categorize itself by abstracting all logic, resulting in the conclusion that no conclusion can exist. In this stage, the mind is confronted with its own impotence, gets frustrated, battles with its self, until it finally transcends the fear that all it has been finding out about the world was based on a method that itself could not be true. This transcendence occurs when the mind lets go of trying to understand, and just accepts that there are some things that cannot be understood.

It must be noted that stage five is at the same time the shortest and the longest stage: in the narrow sense, it is experienced as only a moment of truth, not as a phase. In the broad sense, it is experienced as a new phase in life: having experienced the transcendence of ones own most fundamental thinking, reality can never be seen with the same eyes again: one has experienced the fundamental unity of the observer and the observed, yielding a new insight: that beyond abstraction, all is one and infinite.

The moment when one accepts this fundamental reality, one understands that ones former concept of truth, understood as «the correct identification of reality» (cf. Rand), is superseded by a truth that is no longer conceptual in nature, but in stead coincides with reality itself. This is what people call «the ultimate truth», «the one and only truth» or «the metaphysical truth». Be-

cause all of these expressions are tautological pleonasms, some prefer to use only one word, implying it all: «God.»

