

## BEGRIFF (GERMAN)

ENGLISH	concept
FRENCH	<i>concept</i>
GREEK	<i>katalépsis</i> [κατάληψις]
LATIN	<i>comprehensio</i>

- CONCEPT [CONCEPTUS, CONCEPTO], and AUFHEBEN, GEISTESWISSENSCHAFTEN, INTELLECT, INTELLECTUS, PERCEPTION, PLASTICITY, PREDICATION, REASON, SOUL, UNDERSTANDING

In its common usage, the German verb *begreifen* designates an understanding of an intellectual order. It is this sense of the “intellectual grasp of a thing or an idea” (in *begreifen* there are echoes of the verb *greifen*: “to seize, catch, capture”) that is found in *Begriff*: “Ich habe keinen Begriff davon” means that one has no access to the thing or idea in question. The inflections to which *Begriff* is subjected in philosophy are related to transformations in theories of knowledge. At first, *Begriff* had the strict sense of a function of understanding (Kant), but then it was given independent reality as a figure of knowledge that acquires consciousness in its journey toward absolute knowledge (Hegel). Finally, on the basis of a definition of *Begriff* that claims to be strictly logical, these different meanings were redefined as still too psychological, to the degree that they still contain something of the ordinary sense of the term (Frege). The current discussion of the possibility of reintellectualizing concepts continues to stumble over the difference in languages between a German *Begriff* that has retained part of its naturalness and an English “concept” that is totally unrelated to ordinary usage.

### I. *Begreifen, Verstehen, Konzipieren* (Kant): Varieties of Understanding

It was with Immanuel Kant that *Begriff* acquired a specific philosophical meaning far removed from the general meaning forged by Christian Wolff (cf. Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedanken*, 1.4: “any representation of a thing in our ideas [*jede Vorstellung einer Sache in unseren Vorstellungen*]”). In his *Logic*, which revised and transformed the vocabulary of German academic philosophy, Kant set this very general meaning of representation against a precise meaning that is part of a classification of the kinds of knowledge in which *begreifen* is distinguished from *verstehen* and *konzipieren*. Here is his definition of the “fifth degree” of knowledge:

To understand [*verstehen, intelligere*] something, to cognize something through the understanding by means of concepts [*durch den Verstand vermöge der Begriffe*], or to conceive [*konzipieren*]. This is very different from comprehending something [*begreifen*]. One can conceive much, although one cannot comprehend it, e.g., a *perpetuum mobile* whose impossibility is shown by mechanics.

(*Lectures on Logic*, trans. Young, 570)

On the other hand, the seventh degree, “to grasp [*begreifen, comprehendere*] something,” means “to know through reason [*durch die Vernunft*] or *a priori*, to the extent that this is suitable for our purposes [*in dem Grade . . . als zu unserer Absicht hinreichend ist*]” (*Logik*, Introduction, §8, in RT: Ak., 9:65; Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. Young, 570).

The classification proposed in the *Logic* is remarkable in that it dissociates the verb *begreifen* from the noun *Begriff*.

Whereas the latter enters easily into the definition of *verstehen* as the fifth degree of knowledge (“cognize something through the understanding by means of concepts”), Kant reserves *begreifen* for the supreme degree of knowledge. It is as if *Begriff* were already neutralized by its technical usage, whereas the meaning of *begreifen* could still be debated. The reason for this is doubtless that the verb *begreifen* still connotes something of the act of grasping, and that Kant can see in it the most complete form of capturing or appropriating the object in question. The phenomenon is further accentuated by the presence in *begreifen* of the prefix *be-*, which signifies transitivity and implies, in this precise case, direct, full contact with the object.

The Kantian classifications may vary, but they never alter this fundamental definition of *begreifen*. Elsewhere, Kant corrects the terminology earlier proposed by the Wolffian Georg Friedrich Meier by refusing to translate *begreifen* with *concipere* (conceive): *begreifen* has to be reserved for *comprehendere*, that is, for a mode of knowledge that makes use of an intuition “per apprehensionem” (*Wiener Logik*, in RT: Ak., 24:845). The detour through Latin is revealing: the idea of *apprehensio*—that is, grasping or capturing—naturally leads Kant to *begreifen*, which contains this idea in its etymology (*greifen*). To be sure, *konzipieren*, which is derived from the Latin *capere*, also includes the idea of capture, but the etymology is blurred, and the determination of *begreifen* passes precisely through a new translation or a new Latin equivalent, *comprehendere*, in which the meaning of prehension, of taking in hand, is more clearly heard.

- See Box 1.

This is the distinction inherited by the term *Begriff*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Begriff* becomes a function of the understanding (as opposed to the object of an intuition)—itself defined as a power of concepts. The *Begriff* is what gathers together, unites, and synthesizes the empirical manifold:

The knowledge yielded by understanding, or at least by the human understanding, must therefore be by means of concepts, and so is not intuitive, but discursive. Whereas all intuitions, as sensible, rest on affections, concepts rest on functions. By “function” I mean the unity of the act of bringing various representations under one common representation. Concepts are based on the spontaneity of thought, sensible intuitions on the receptivity of impressions.

(*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in RT: Ak., 3:85–86, trans. Kemp-Smith, 105)

### II. *Der Begriff: Concepts and the Concept* (Hegel)

The relative ease with which the use of the term *Begriff* in the *Critique of Pure Reason* can be translated (unlike its use in passages dealing with definitions, such as the one in the *Logic*) no doubt proceeds from the fact that Kant conceives *Begriffe* in their plurality: there are as many concepts as there are possible functions. On the other hand, the term becomes more difficult to understand when it is used exclusively in the singular—as it is in Hegel, whose philosophy is a philosophy of the Concept, the *Begriff*, without further determination. The passage from the plural to the singular also marks

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**Grasping: *Katalêpsis* and *comprehensio***

► CONCEPTUS, PATHOS, PERCEPTION, PHANTASIA, REPRÉSENTATION

The Stoics distinguish among true representations those that are apprehensive (in the active sense of “capable of actively grasping objects or situations”) and those that are not. For them, an apprehensive representation, *phantasia katalêptikê* [φαντασία καταληπτική], is the most exact and precise, and the one that represents in the mind the peculiar characteristics of the thing represented:

An apprehensive one is the one that is from a real thing and is stamped and impressed in accordance with just *that* real thing, and is of such a kind as could not come about from a thing that was not real. For since they trust this appearance to be capable of perfectly grasping the underlying things, and to be skillfully stamped with all the peculiarities attaching to them, they say that it has each of these as an attribute.

(Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos*, 8.248–49, trans. Bett, 50)

It is a representation so “plain and striking” that it “all but grabs us by the hair, and draws us into assent” (ibid., 8.257, trans. Bett, 52).

The assent that we irresistibly give to such a representation leads to grasping or comprehension, *katalêpsis* [κατάληψις]:

Zeno professed to illustrate this by a piece of action; for when he stretched out his fingers, and showed the palm of his hand, “Perception,” said he, “is a thing like this.” Then, when he had a little closed his fingers, “Assent is like this.” Afterwards, when he had completely closed his hand, and held forth his fist, that, he said, was comprehension. From which simile he also gave that state a name which it had not before, and called it *katalêpsis*. But when he brought his left hand against his right, and with it took a firm and tight hold of his fist, knowledge, he said, was of that character; and that was what none but a wise man possessed.

(Cicero, *Academic Questions*, 1.47, trans. Yonge)

The clenched fist illustrates comprehension; the other hand gripping it tightly illustrates science, which stabilizes and preserves this comprehension.

The act of prehension and grasping expressed by the verb *comprehendere* (and the noun *comprehensio*) is discernible in all uses of the term that include sensorial apprehension (e.g., Cicero, *De legibus*, 1.30) and all of the levels of taking possession intellectually: thus discourse is imprinted on the mind of the orator because he has first “grasped” the ideas that he will develop by means of images that remind him of them (Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.359). The words themselves “enclose” the thought that they have “grasped” (*De oratore*, 1.70), just as the oratorical period “includes” and “circumscribes” the thought (*Brutus*, 34). All of these possible translations of *comprehendere* allow us to glimpse the richness of the term that Cicero chose to render the Stoic *katalêpsis*: other terms were acceptable, which the Stoic in the dialogue *De finibus* (3.17) gives as equivalents of *katalêpsis*: *cognitio* and *perceptio*. But by choosing *comprehendere*, Cicero emphasizes the gesture Zeno used to describe the different levels of knowledge (and to illustrate as well the relation between rhetoric and dialectic [*De finibus*, 2.17; *De oratore*, 113]). The importance Cicero accords to this gesture, attested by him alone, gives its full weight to Zeno’s bending of the substantive *katalêpsis*, which before him had never been used to designate anything but a concrete grasping or capture. The hand gesture makes it possible to understand the unity of movement from representation (*phantasis-visum*)—the open hand—to comprehension—the closed fist—and then to science—the fist gripped by the other hand (*Academic Questions*, 2.145; see above). The hand is still active, but it exercises its activity on itself: the close interweaving of activity in the course of a process that is also a passive reception is stressed by Cicero’s translations of *phantasia katalêptikê*. The adjective *katalêptikê* [καταληπτική], generally interpreted as having an active sense, also has a passive sense: Cicero uses not *katalêptikon* [καταληπτικόν] but *katalêpton* [καταληπτόν], which means “grasp” or “what

can be grasped” (*Academic Questions*, 1.41); he translates this term by *comprehendibile*, so that we understand more clearly, thanks to this translation, that representation is what permits grasping, because it can itself be grasped; the grasp becomes possession only when the representation has received assent and approval (“visum . . . acceptum . . . et approbatum”):

[Zeno] did not give credit to everything which is perceived, but only to those which contain some especial character of those things which are seen; but he pronounced what was seen, when it was discerned on account of its own power, *comprehensibile* . . . after it had been received and approved, then he called it *comprehension*, resembling those things which are taken up [*prehenduntur*] in the hand.

(Cicero, *Academic Questions*, 1.41, trans. Yonge)

Thus strengthened by the explanation given to the Stoic “gesture” of *katalêpsis*, the classical meanings of the Latin *comprehendere* determined its subsequent philosophical uses. In the Middle Ages, the novelty of the Latin *conceptus* had to do with the fact that to the image of capture, still present in the word through the verb *con-capere*, was added another, that of giving birth (as in “conception”). From this resulted an entirely different representation of the system of the faculties and of the activity of knowledge (see CONCEPTUS).

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the passage from a philosophy of knowledge that associates concept and understanding with a philosophy that claims to be a Science, and to that end unites the Concept with Spirit.

In French translations, the capital C is probably the most economical way of indicating the emphatic use Hegel

makes of the term “Concept”; it would otherwise be difficult to render in French, which is accustomed to the plural (*les concepts*) or the indefinite (*un concept*). Hegel is in fact the philosopher who opposes *the* Concept to concepts in the plural (cf. *Aesthetik* 1, in *Werke*, 13:127: “In recent

times, no concept has been as infirm as the Concept itself"). The Concept is thus considered to be a figure of knowledge: it is the absolutely simple and pure element in which truth has its existence (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke*, vol. 3), and only its deployment, also called "the work of the concept" (*Arbeit des Begriffs*), provides access to "scientific understanding" (*wissenschaftliche Einsicht*). The *Phenomenology of Mind* makes the *Begriff* almost a dramatic figure by characterizing it as the "movement of knowledge," a movement that is a "self-movement" (*Selbstbewegung*). This movement of the Concept, which can also be called a movement of self-reflection, but is already in the unity of being and reflection (cf. *Wissenschaft der Logik*, in *Werke*, vol. 6), terminates in the unity of knowledge and its object (*Phänomenologie*), which is at the same time division, partition, separation between the different things that are "what they are through the activity of the Concept that dwells in them and reveals itself in them" (die Dinge sind das was sie sind durch die Tätigkeit des innewohnenden und in ihnen sich offenbarenden Begriffs: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* 1, *Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, §163, add. 2, in *Werke*, 8:313). At the end of "Doctrine of the Concept" in *Science of Logic*, the *Begriff* is subsumed by the Idea (see AUFHEBEN), which is also in the singular: the Idea is "the adequate Concept, the objectively true or the true as such" (der adäquate Begriff, das objektive Wahre oder das Wahre als solches, *Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, in *Werke*, vol. 6). Nonetheless, it remains the "principle of philosophy," and in this sense we find it again in the *Philosophy of Mind* in the *Encyclopedia* (cf. *Philosophie des Geistes*, in *Werke*, vol. 10).

This speculative use of the term *Begriff* remains doubly faithful to the common use of the word, however. In the singular, *der Begriff* perhaps suggests above all the act of seizing or grasping, of taking everything to "inhabit" it and be "revealed" in it, as we have seen in Hegel. In addition, when Hegel speaks of the "Begriff des Begriffs" (in *Werke*, vol. 6), he adds to this play on the etymology a completely ordinary use of the word that makes it a synonym of *Bestimmung*, "definition." Despite the inherently speculative aspect of this reduplication of terms, "Begriff des Begriffs" does not mean so much "concept of the concept" as "definition of the concept," that is, its abridged idea, or, as Hegel puts it, its *Abbréviatur*, "abbreviation" (in *Werke*, vol. 5). The extended use of the term, between common language and technical vocabulary, makes it possible to take the same term in two different senses in the same expression.

Thus in Kant and Hegel, the specificity of *Begriff* and *begreifen* resides in each case in grammatical peculiarities: the different uses that make the nominal form (*Begriff*) and the verbal form (*begreifen*) possible in Kant, and the singular and the plural of *Begriff* possible in Hegel. From one author to the other, the play on etymology shifts from the verb (Kant plays mainly on *begreifen*) to the noun (Hegel's play on the majesty of the singular). In both cases, however, the theory of knowledge and the speculative doctrine of science are deployed in a close relationship with ordinary language, or at least with the phantasmal version provided by the etymology. It is this relationship that is lost as soon as the term is translated into French.

### III. *Begriff* and the Linguistic Turn

#### A. *Begriffsschrift* (Frege)

*Begriff* also lends itself to a more strictly *logical* definition, that is, one in which the preceding meanings are contested as connected with a use that is still "psychological." Gottlob Frege's *Begriffsschrift* undertakes a transformation of this kind, and the French translation of his title (*Idéographie*) is for that reason problematic. As Frege points out in his preface:

My goal was to seek first of all to reduce the concept of succession [*den Begriff der Anordnung*] to a series of logical consequences, and then to advance toward the concept of number. To prevent something intuitive [*etwas anschauliches*] from being inadvertently introduced, the absence of gaps in the sequence of deductions had to be assured. . . . That is why I abandoned any attempt to express anything that has no meaning for the deduction. In §3, I have designated as conceptual content [*als begrifflichen Inhalt*] what alone is important to me. This explanation must consequently always be kept in mind if one wants to understand correctly the essence of my formula language [*Formelsprache*]. From this also follows the name *Begriffsschrift*.

The difficulty involved in using "concept" in translating the *Begriffsschrift* comes from the fact that in it, Frege proposes a definition of the concept (and thus of the conceptual content) that is inseparable from his view of logic and his principled antipsychologism. In the preface to *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (The foundations of arithmetic), he defines the three principles guiding his approach: always clearly separate the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective; never ask what a word means by itself, but always in context; and never lose sight of the distinction between concept and object (der Unterschied zwischen Begriff und Gegenstand ist im Auge zu behalten: *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, x). The *Begriff* is not a psychological but a logical notion. The distinction between concept and object proceeds entirely from the new logic, according to which simple utterances are analyzed for their function and argument. For example, in the sentence "The Earth is a planet," we can replace "Earth" by other proper nouns, and obtain in this way the sentences "Venus is a planet," "Mars is a planet," and so on. What remains invariant in these sentences is a function, which takes this or that object as its argument. A concept is a function at a place, what can be said of an object. We see that the notion of the concept, thus defined, is in no way psychological, and is independent of any idea of "grasping." Moreover, as Frege explains in "Funktion und Begriff" (Function and concept), the concept thus defined is no longer closed or complete, but in need of an argument; it is "unsaturated" (*ungesättigt*: in *Funktion, Begriff, Bedeutung*, 29).

In his article "Begriff und Gegenstand" (Concept and object), Frege replies to a few objections that had been addressed to him by Benno Kerry regarding his use of the concept of concept:

The term "concept" [*Begriff*] has several uses; it is sometimes taken in the psychological sense, and sometimes in the logical sense, and perhaps also in a confused

acceptation that mixes the two. But this freedom has its natural limit; as soon as a certain use of the term is put in play, it is desirable that it should be maintained. For my part, I have chosen to adhere strictly to the purely logical use of the term.

("Begriff und Gegenstand," in *Funktion, Begriff, Bedeutung*, 66)

#### B. The analytical uses of "concept"

Such a purely logical approach poses a problem, which Frege lucidly outlines in "Begriff und Gegenstand": How can we talk about a concept (for example, when we say that it is clear, simple, general, and so on) without making it an object and thus violating the principles of Frege's approach? The question, which was to obsess many twentieth-century philosophers of language, is that of predication. If an object is anything about which one can say something (and thus, anything one can make "fall under a" concept), we can speak of "a" concept, and that is what we do, very commonly in fact. Frege's redefinitions have thus not eliminated, even in the analytical field, all work on the notion of the concept, and they have even elicited a new line of reflection on individuation and the distinction of concepts. The logicization and depsychologization of the concept of concept accomplished by Frege have certainly led, in a first phase, to a decay of the concept in favor of predication and objects (to which first Rudolf Carnap's work and then W.V.O. Quine's testifies, each in its own way). The term "concept" has been maintained, but in a rather vague sense, notably in the common expression "conceptual scheme" used by Quine (*From a Logical Point of View*, 44ff.) and his successors in the sense of the whole of our conception of the world, or the whole of our knowledge ("the conceptual scheme of science"): the expression acquires a special flavor from the fact that according to Quine, this conceptual scheme is inseparable from a language and an ontology that are themselves untranslatable into another language in an unequivocal way (see SENSE). The idea of a conceptual scheme is thus associated with the whole debate about incommensurability and relativism that has roiled analytical philosophy and epistemology since the 1960s. This is shown not only by Richard Rorty's work, but also by Donald Davidson's famous text, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in which Davidson vehemently criticizes the idea of a conceptual scheme and a "point of view" on the world as a source of "conceptual relativism" and associates it—following in that respect Quine himself—with the idea of linguistic difference and untranslatability. A conceptual scheme is language conceived as a source of the conception and categorization of the world. We see what difficulties the philosophy of language encounters in seeking to eliminate or resolve the question of conceptualization, difficulties that have led to a massive return, since the end of the twentieth century, to concepts: it was in fact the return of analytical philosophy to the philosophy of mind, against the antipsychological precepts of Frege and Ludwig Wittgenstein, that allowed a resurgence of the term, this time generally in the plural and rementalized: that is the case in English philosopher Christopher Peacocke's *A Study of Concepts*, which has been much discussed since the 1990s. Many recent discussions of concepts bear on the possession of

concepts, in the sense of "mental representations." There is, for example, current debate about "nonconceptual content," that is, an intrinsic content of experience that is supposed to be a representation independent of concepts.

Peacocke introduces his thought in *A Study of Concepts* this way:

We need to be clear about the subject matter of a theory of concepts. The term "concept" has by now come to be something of a term of art. The word does not have in English a unique sense that is theoretically important.

Peacocke then quotes Woody Allen, who has a character in his film *Annie Hall* say, "Right now it's only a notion, but I think I can get money to make it into a concept . . . and later turn it into an idea." Peacocke implies here, in an interesting way, that the word "concept" in English no longer really has an ordinary use, and that it certainly does not refer, as he says later on, to the Fregean use. Hence he proposes a purely stipulative definition of concepts based on distinguishing them through their propositional content. We can imagine that it is the logicism of the Fregean conceptual notation and definitions that makes constantly possible, in the wake of analytical philosophy, new, more or less arbitrary definitions of the concept; nonetheless, by the roles that he assigns in his definitions to "functions" and their operativity, Frege maintains a naturalness in the use of *Begriff* that is probably lost in later English translations and the most contemporary uses of "concept."

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