

Concepts and Understanding Exercise
PHIL201

Concepts may be called the basic elements of human thought. Although their exact nature is the subject of ongoing study, it seems safe to say this much: concepts are general representations of reality; they contain “marks” or “content” that certain things in the world may or may not “match” or satisfy. In other words, concepts have an *intension* (or meaning or definition) and an *extension* (the things referred to in virtue of their meaning).

Example: *cow*

Intension (meaning): large, ruminant animal with horns and cloven hoofs, female, domesticated for human use (food, labor) – (or something like this)

Extension: (all the cows, out there)

To Understand a concept is to be capable of “matching” its intension with elements of its extension. This process, too, is the object of continuing investigation, but it amounts roughly to a mental activity whereby one recognizes the meaning of a concept’s marks or contents in one’s (actual or imagined) experience of a particular object or event. In other words, to understand a concept is to recognize its *satisfaction* in some object or event.

Thus, in order to understand the concept of *cow*, one must know its content concepts (*large, ruminant, animal, with, horn, hoof, cloven, female, etc.*), and be able to determine which experiences do and which do not satisfy those ideas.



If you understand the concept, you will readily be able to identify three of the above images as representing cows. Note that Guernsey, Holstein, and Jersey are all kinds of cow, while Equilateral is not. And note further that your understanding of the concepts, *brown, white, and part* enable you to identify two of the above as representing partly brown objects, and all of the above as partly white.

Concept application is fundamental to human thought. In contexts such as the above, it is a relatively simple matter, and we readily demonstrate and convey understanding when required to do so. However, as concepts become more complex or abstract, it is important to be clear about what concepts and their understanding consist in, if one is effectively to master and communicate them. And since many of the important concepts encountered in philosophy are themselves complex or abstract (or both), our first exercise involves *concept explication*.

“Teaching Writing in Philosophy Courses”

Concept Explication involves providing a clear, thorough account of the intension and extension of a concept in such a way that the reader gains an *understanding* of it. Three things, then, are involved:

1. a statement of the intension or meaning of the concept;
2. one or more examples of the extension of the concept as encountered (or encounterable) in experience;
3. clear connections drawn between the marks or elements of (1) and the particular features of (2).

It is important to effective concept communication that one include all three of the above parts of a concept explication. In particular, don't leave it at simply (1) or (1) and (2). You must “complete the thought” for your reader, by showing how the potential experience of (2) satisfies the meaning expressed in (1). And as is often the case, where one has multiple tasks to perform, it is a good idea to “divide and conquer:” carry out each of the tasks separately and self-consciously. As one gains experience, this will become second-nature; but initially, it is good practice to execute each distinctly.

Part One (in class, in pairs)

Select one of the following concepts and construct a thorough explication of it. Include in your account the three elements listed above.

beverage medicine ridge meal life art emotion blemish

Part Two (for tomorrow, June 9)

After reading the assigned portions of Chapter One in *The Philosopher's Way*, write an explication of the concept *philosophy*. As above, this will require that you (1) define philosophy (state the meaning of the concept); (2) offer examples illustrating philosophy as you have defined it; and (3) explicitly point out how the elements of your illustrations “satisfy” the terms of your definition. The result should be that your reader comes to an understanding of philosophy.

Note that since philosophy is a complex phenomenon, you will have to strive for maximal efficiency, even as you provide the details necessary to complete your account. Feel free, in any case, to make use of the materials provided in the text (citing as needed). Note, too, that this is a preliminary exercise, to be expanded on as the course proceeds.

Size and Shape:

- *maximum* 300 words; place a WORD COUNT in the heading of your exercise.
- please type and DOUBLE SPACE your submission.
- due in class Tuesday, June 9.

Formal Essay Section I
PHIL201

Your overall objective is to write an essay conveying to the reader some understanding of philosophy. Understanding, as we have seen, has a structure. That structure consists in synthesizing the intellectual marks of a concept with certain objects or elements of experience. Consequently, your essay involves your specifying the marks of the concept of philosophy, as well as the marks of a number of sub-concepts, and connecting those with elements of their extensions. Your exercise on the explication of the general concept of *philosophy* should have done precisely this, and will now serve as a basis for the rest of your essay.

The rest of your essay will involve delving deeper into the specific nature of philosophy, both in intension and in extension. The first part of this process will concern the “what is it?” form of philosophical question and material from our discussion of the “self”. In this discussion, we see a variety of arguments about the nature of the self, especially as it involves the mind (or soul) and the body. Your task, in this portion of the essay, is to analyze and evaluate one or more such argument, and to connect that account with your definition of philosophy, via the “what is it?” question.

More specifically, this section of your essay should include the following:

- your original explication of the concept of philosophy, modified as needed;
- some reference to the role of the “what is it?” question in philosophy; you will want to frame this so as to connect explicitly with your definition of philosophy;
- analysis and evaluation of one or more arguments (or positions) concerning philosophical examination of the self;
- specific connection of the result of your evaluation (above) with your definition of philosophy.

Notice that you will be repeating the process of concept explication, in this exercise, at a “lower” level – i.e., at a level subsidiary to the general level of explicating the concept of philosophy. This means that you will employ the same general method in analyzing and evaluating some argument about the self as you did in the first exercise. Where necessary, you will state and explain concepts (their meaning or intension), provide illustrations of them (their extension), and connect the two explicitly.

Other details:

- due in class Monday, 6/22/09;
- typed and double-spaced; include a total word-count, please;
- ideal size: 700-1000 words (including original concept explication);
- works cited page and in-text citations, as needed;
- *please submit also your original concept explication exercise, as marked by me.*

“Teaching Writing in Philosophy Courses”

Likely, you will want to start keeping rough-hand track of the structure of your essay – i.e., an outline – as that structure is becoming complex. This outline should have something like the following structure:

- I. What is philosophy? (introductory statement and explanation of what philosophy is)
 - a. Philosophy is ... (statement of definition of philosophy)
 - b. Mark 1: ...
 - c. Mark 2: ...
 - d. ...
- II. What is it? (more specific account of (one aspect of?) philosophy in terms of its efforts to answer “what is it?” questions)
 - a. Statement of the role of “what is it?” questions or questioning in philosophy
 - i. Note connection to Mark/s #/#
 - b. Application to philosophical “what is it?” examination of the self
 - i. Instance of such examination
 1. Analysis
 2. Evaluation
 - c. Recapitulation of connection to Mark/s #/# of definition of philosophy with specific reference to result of Evaluation (above)
- III. What is it worth?
- IV. How do I know?