

teorema

Vol. XXII/1-2, 2003, pp. 85-93

The Non-circularity Constraint: Peacocke vs. Peacocke*

Dan López de Sa

RESUMEN

De acuerdo con la teoría que Peacocke desarrolla en *A Study of Concepts* (1992), se puede individuar un concepto dando las condiciones que un pensador debe satisfacer para poseerlo. De ahí que las condiciones de posesión deban ser especificables de un modo que respeten un requisito de no-circularidad. En un artículo más reciente “Implicit Conceptions, Understanding and Rationality”, (1998a) Peacocke argumenta en contra de su anterior teoría, a la luz del fenómeno que consiste en aceptar racionalmente principios que no se siguen de cosas que el pensador aceptaba previamente. En este artículo defendiendo la teoría del libro, manteniendo que el requisito de no-circularidad debe ser respetado, y que las ideas más recientes de Peacocke se pueden acomodar en el marco de su anterior teoría acerca de los conceptos.

ABSTRACT

According to the view that Peacocke elaborates in *A Study of Concepts* (1992), a concept can be individuated by providing the conditions a thinker must satisfy in order to possess that concept. Hence possession conditions for concepts should be specifiable in a way that respects a non-circularity constraint. In a more recent paper “Implicit Conceptions, Understanding and Rationality” (1998a) Peacocke argues against his former view, in the light of the phenomenon of rationally accepting principles which do not follow from what the thinker antecedently accepts. In this paper I defend the view of the book from his more recent criticisms, claiming that the non-circularity constraint should be respected, and that Peacocke's more recent insights could be accommodated in the framework of his former theory of concepts.

One of the main tenets of *A Study of Concepts* (1992) was what Christopher Peacocke labeled “Principle of Dependence:”

There can be nothing more to the nature of a concept than is determined by a correct account of the capacity of a thinker who has mastered the concept to have propositional attitudes to contents containing that concept (a correct account of “grasping the concept”) [Peacocke (1992), p. 5],

acceptance of which

opens up the possibility that we can simultaneously say in a single account what individuates a particular concept and also what it is to possess that concept” [Peacocke (1992), p. 6].

On the other hand, in his more recent ‘Implicit Conceptions, Understanding and Rationality’ [Peacocke (1998a)], he offers an account of what he calls *implicit conceptions*, underlying the possession of (some) concepts, which fundamentally help in explaining the rationality in accepting new principles involving the concept, “new” in that they do not follow from what the thinker in question antecedently accepts.

Let me say from the beginning that I do find Peacocke’s elaborations on both elements very attractive. Being that so, I would like very much the possibility of having them both. Unfortunately, Peacocke claims, that couldn’t be the case. The main reason for that, if I understand it right, deals precisely with the *A Study of Concepts’ non-circularity constraint*. That is the requirement that possession conditions for a given concept *F* should be given in “the *A(C)* form,” that is, in its simplest version (and the more complicated ones need not be considered for the purposes of the present paper), by something with the form

concept *F* is that unique concept *C* to possess which a thinker must meet condition *A(C)*,

where concept *F* should not be ineliminably mentioned as such in *A(C)* under the scope of psychological attitudes of the thinker. Peacocke himself summarizes the main rationale for that requirement thus:

If the account does mention the concept in *that* way, it will not have elucidated what it sets out to elucidate. Any ineliminable use of an expression for the concept *F* inside the scope of a psychological attitude context will just take for granted what we wanted to explain, possession of the concept [Peacocke (1992), p. 9].

Now in his 1998a paper, Peacocke seems to hold that to the extent that non-circularity constraint was an essential part of his former 1992 theory, all the worse for that theory:

What I have said about implicit conceptions is incompatible with adoption of the *A(C)* form of *A Study of Concepts*, and involves abandonment of that constraint on the philosophical explication of concept-possession. ... Implicit conceptions of the sort I have advocated violate this principle. I have been advocating implicit conceptions with such contents as “Any sentence of the form ‘not-*A*’ is true iff *A* is not true”, and “Any sentence of the form $A \vee B$ is true iff either *A* is true or *B* is true”. Here the occurrences of ‘not’ and ‘or’ on the right-hand-side of these biconditionals violates the *A(C)* restriction when

implicit conceptions with these contents are offered as explications of possession of the concepts of negation and alternation. There are various ways in which one can try to qualify the A(C) form to avoid an incompatibility, but I can only report that I have not been able to find any that are well-motivated and also cover the ground [Peacocke (1998a), p. 73].

All that notwithstanding, in this paper I will try in this paper to defend Peacocke's (1992) view concerning the non-circularity constraint from Peacocke's (1998a) most recent criticisms. That defense will be two-fold. In the first, more negative, part I will try to argue that implicit conceptions *should better not be* incompatible with the non-circularity constraint on concept possession; whereas in the second, more positive, part I will try to argue implicit conceptions *need indeed not be* incompatible with that constraint.

More in particular, in section I, I will very briefly restate and elaborate on Peacocke's own former rationale for the constraint just alluded to, according to which the individuativeness involved in the claim that concepts are individuated by conditions for possessing them, requires statements of those conditions not to violate the non-circularity constraint. In section II I will discuss what I take to be Peacocke's more recent defense from that objection. Attention to it suggest that maybe Peacocke sees the proposal of implicit conceptions as requiring not just abandoning the non-circularity constraint, but rather giving up the basic idea of *A Study of Concepts* of individuating concepts by means of the conditions to possess them. In the final section III I will try to provide the reasons why I think the motivation for implicit conceptions and implicit conceptions themselves do not require such a radical departure, and could be accommodated in the general framework of *A Study of Concepts*, respecting the non-circularity constraint.

I. THE CASE FOR THE NON-CIRCULARITY CONSTRAINT

The theory of *A Study of Concepts* aims to exploit the possibility of individuating a concept by giving the conditions needed to possess it. Now there arguably is a sense of individuating something such that it requires no more than to provide a property it uniquely exemplifies. So understood, individuating is quite an easy task. In the limit, one could say that, for any entity *e* whatsoever, the property of being identical to *e* would be such an individuating property, in this sense. One would probably feel with respect to those purportedly individuating properties some sort of uneasiness, for in a way they seem to violate a somehow more epistemic element which seems involved in (a suitable narrower kind of) individuating something. It seems as if it was required, for something to be individuating of something else, something like this: it should be in principle possible to establish the identity of the

former, individuating, thing without first establishing the identity of the latter, individuated, one. Violations of this are then understandably seen as somehow *circular*. Going back to the limit case: there is a sense in which the property of being identical to *e* individuates *e*, but this is circular in that we could not figure out that something has this, individuative, property without first having settled the question about the identity of the thing in question.

Now how the details of that should be filled out need not concern us here, in so much as it seems that something of the sort is required in order to avoid individuation becoming trivial, and it seen that something like this is what seems to be exploited in Peacocke's 1992 motivation for the non-circularity constraint I have formerly alluded to, as applied to statements of the possession condition of a concept that individuates it:

What a good account [of a particular concept *F* with the suggested general form] must avoid is ineliminable mention of the concept *F* as the concept *F* within the scope of psychological attitudes of the thinker. If the account does mention the concept in *that* way, it will not have elucidated what it sets out to elucidate. Any ineliminable use of an expression for the concept *F* inside the scope of a psychological attitude context will just take for granted what we wanted to explain, possession of the concept [Peacocke (1992), p. 9].

The worry, I take it, could also be dramatized in a similar way than the considered general one. If such a mention was not forbidden, how it could be prevented the following rather easy general way of providing (individuating) possession conditions for concepts: for any concept *F* whatsoever, *F* is that unique concept *C* to possess which a thinker must meet the condition needed in order for him to possess the concept *F*. (I am assuming that 'possessing a concept *_*' induces a context sufficiently similar to 'believing *_*'. If somebody doubts about that, she could try with something along the lines of "is in a position, without acquiring new concepts, to entertain thoughts containing *F*" or some other related ones.)

At this point one can feel that the non-circularity constraint amounts to something so basic and fundamentally tight to the very idea of possibly individuating a concept by providing its possession condition that it would be hard to think about doing without. That is at least my feeling, and what motivates this paper. I will consider next what Peacocke holds about this former thought of his we are concerned with, but before that, I would like to stress one thing that, as I understand it, the non-circularity requirement does *not* require, namely, *conceptual reducibility*. It is starting to be a quite frequently made point that classical reductive conceptual analyses are not available (if ever) for most interesting concepts: at best one can hope to explicate them by illuminatingly stating truths involving them which show the constitutive relations they bear to other concepts, without *reducing* them. Regardless whether

that is indeed a sound point or not, I think the non-circularity requirement is entire compatible with it. I cannot elaborate on this here, but the key elements would include the following. On the one side, as Peacocke himself emphasized, there seems to be nothing in the non-circularity constraint that precludes the possibility of there being families of concepts such that they couldn't be individuated without each involving the others. As he said:

Some relaxations consistent with the underlying motivation of the form $A(C)$ make that general form less demanding. One relaxation is motivated by the fact that in a wide range of cases a set of concepts has the property that one can give an account of possession of any one of its members only by mentioning what is involved in possession of the other members of the set. In such cases we have a local holism [Peacocke (1992), p. 10].

On the other hand, as the account of the concept of conjunction of *A Study of Concepts* illustrate, it is neither incompatible with the non-circularity requirement to hold that there are concepts such that their (individuating) possession conditions involve transitions among thoughts involving those concepts, insomuch as these are not mentioned *as such* in the relevant statements. Being all that so, those so-called “non-vicious circularities” which constitute local holisms are not excluded by the non-circularity requirement. (That constitutes, by the way, a source of uneasiness with respect to Peacocke's interchange with Schiffer concerning precisely this matter (see Schiffer 1998, Peacocke 1998b). There Peacocke suggest that a difference between his former and later views concerns precisely in the abandonment of the *A Study of Concepts*' reductive aims. That I only understand if ‘reductive’ in this context amounts to *non-circular*, in the sense in which the non-circular requirement requires.)

II. PEACOCKE ON THE CASE FOR THE NON-CIRCULARITY CONSTRAINT

In his 1998a paper, and after claiming that what he has said about implicit conceptions is incompatible with the non-circularity constraint, when their contents are offered as explicating the possession of the concepts they underlie, Peacocke offers what I take to be his response to his former case for the non-circularity constraint with which we have been concerned so far. Let me quote him at some length:

Violations of the $A(C)$ form are unobjectionable in the explication of a concept F because one can use one's own mastery of the concept F to assess what someone with an implicit conception involving F could be expected to think or to do in any given state of information. This is why a statement about what is involved in possession of a concept, and which does not respect the $A(C)$ form,

is not vacuous. It still makes an assessable claim. Each one of us, in evaluating the claim it makes, draws on his own mastery of the concept *F* being explicated. One draws on that mastery, and engages in simulations to assess what one would be obliged or rational, to think or to do in any given state of information. With information from these simulations, one is then in a position to assess the claims about possession of the concept in question [Peacocke (1998a), p. 73].

I should confess that I am not sure about understanding him properly here. For the case for the non-circularity constraint was a general one, which stem from the mere fact of what would issue from the claim that concepts could be individuated, in the relevant, illuminating, sense, by providing the conditions for their possession. Now the point Peacocke is here making is certainly sound with respect to the proposal of *A Study of Concepts*: one should draw upon one's own mastery of a given concept in assessing whether a given statement of the purportedly conditions to possess it is indeed so. But even if the point is also correct with respect to the implicit conceptions proposal, I fail to see how it could dispel the case for the non-circularity constraint considered. If implicit conceptions were incompatible with the non-circularity requirement when their contents are offered as explication of the conditions for possessing the concepts they underlie, then those conditions couldn't be, because of that, individuating in the relevant sense of the concepts in question, for that sense of individuating requires something that in this particular case arguably amounts precisely to statements of possession conditions meeting the non-circularity constraint.

(That is indeed what I understand is part of Schiffer's doubts about implicit conceptions I have previously alluded to, when he says:

I might note a further problem, also pointed out to me by Bogoshian, which arises for any implicit conception that uses the concept it's supposed to underlie. This is that it will secure, by virtue of the fact that its content contains the concept in question, that the thinker possesses that concept, whatever the further content of that implicit conception is, no matter even if that content is a false proposition [Schiffer (1998), pp. 90-1].

Now for all we have seen the non-circularity constraint could be abandoned, compatibly with the soundness of the considered case for it, by abandoning the purpose of individuating a concept by providing the condition for possessing it characteristic of *A Study of Concepts*. Even if Peacocke repeatedly stresses in this later work that his new proposal does not represent a complete change of view with respect to the theory of the book, particularly in that a substantial part of the essence of the account of the *a priori* could be retained, he also suggests that such a radical departure could be taking place. For, just after discussing the reasons for the claim that what he now thinks about "implicit conceptions is incompatible with adoption of the *A(C)* form of *A Study*

of *Concepts*, and involves abandonment of that constraint on the philosophical explication of concept-possession” (1998a, 73), he adds:

I will not pursue here the many issues involved in adopting a theory of mastery of a concept which cannot be fitted in the $A(C)$ form. A fuller development is owed [Peacocke (1998a), p. 74].

So, and as a way of summarizing, maybe the situation is as follows. Maybe the implicit conceptions’ proposal does indeed agree with the case for the non-circularity constraint, and to that extent grant the following conditional: if the *A Study of Concepts*’ goal of individuating concepts by providing its possession conditions is to be pursued at all then statements of those individuating possession conditions should indeed meet the non-circularity constraint. And maybe the proposal of implicit conceptions, or the phenomenon which motivates them to be considered next, rise doubts about the non-circularity constraint being possibly met, and *therefore* rise doubts about the basic idea of *A Study of Concepts* of individuating concepts by their possession conditions. In what remains I will try to provide some reason for mitigating these doubts.

III. IMPLICIT CONCEPTIONS AND THE PHENOMENON OF NEW PRINCIPLES

One of the main motivations for the account of implicit conceptions, Peacocke declares, is reflection of what is involved in rational acceptance of new principles which do not follow from those a thinker already accepts. Peacocke introduces it with the help of the example of your first encounter with, say, the inference rule “From A, the conclusion A or B can be inferred” at one of your first logic lessons:

There is such a phenomenon as a thinker in your situation reflecting, drawing on his understanding of the expressions in the rule, and coming to appreciate that the axiom or rule is valid. What is going on when such reflection takes place? [Peacocke (1998a), p. 44].

As he makes clear, that should not be accounted for in terms of straightforward inference, for, in an important sense of *accepting*, it could very easily be that it doesn’t follow from any other principles you might previously accept, and still less is to be accounted for in terms of accepting a stipulation. Rather, he submits, it is to be accounted for in terms of your drawing on your already possessed understanding of the relevant words. Peacocke’s suggestion is thus:

[T]he thinker's understanding of the connective "or" involves (and is perhaps to be identified with) his possession of an implicit conception, a conception with the following content: that any sentence of the form 'A or B' is true iff either A is true or B is true. Similarly at the level of thought: a thinker's grasp of the concept of alternation involves (and is perhaps to be identified with) his possession of an implicit conception, a conception with the content that any Thought (content) of the form *A or B* is true iff either *A* is true or *B* is true [Peacocke (1998a), p. 46].

As I said at the beginning, I pretty much like Peacocke's elaborations on this suggestion. What is not clear to me is why it should be seen as violating the *A Study of Concepts*' non-circularity constraint, and therefore, why it should lead to an abandonment of the considered basic idea. Paradoxically enough, Peacocke himself advances a way a defender of the *A(C)* form could try. When considering various kinds of "deflationary objectors" he considers the following:

[Our second deflationary objector] may say that it suffices for his purposes to consider a conceptual role mentioning metalinguistic transitions involving predications of truth and falsity themselves. It is metalinguistic inferential dispositions what are run off line, he may say, and which generate the truth-table for 'or.' Given the metalinguistic premise that A is true and B is false, for instance, the thinker will immediately be willing to infer that 'A or B' is true [Peacocke (1998a), p. 60].

Now, deflationary motivations aside, it seems to me that the idea can be employed by the defender of the *A(C)* form, by having something like:

The concept of alteration is that unique concept *C* to possess which a thinker must find transitions that are instances of the following form primitively compelling:

<i>A</i> is true	<i>A</i> is true	<i>A</i> is false	<i>A</i> is false
<u><i>B</i> is true</u>	<u><i>B</i> is false</u>	<u><i>B</i> is true</u>	<u><i>B</i> is false</u>
<i>ACB</i> is true	<i>ACB</i> is true	<i>ACB</i> is true	<i>ACB</i> is false

Something like this does indeed satisfy the non-circularity constraint. Besides "incidental doubts," Peacocke's reply to the previous deflationist is the following:

[I]n moving to the metalinguistic level, it is not presenting a competitor to the theory of implicit conceptions. Finding such a metalinguistic transition as is cited in this objection to be a compelling transition is a manifestation of an implicit conception with the content that any sentence of the form 'A or B' is true either if A is true or B is true [Peacocke (1998a), p. 61].

But here I don't see why the defender of the *A(C)* form should disagree. Rather, properly elaborated, it would constitute precisely a way of stating Peacocke's more recent insights concerning implicit conceptions in the background of his former theory of concepts

Departament de Lògica, Història y Filosofia de la Ciència
Universitat de Barcelon
Baldri Reixac s/n, E - 08028 Barcelona, Spain
E--mail: dlopez@trivium.gh.ub.es

NOTES

* Research has been partially funded by the research projects BFF2001-3466 funded by DGI, Spanish Government and 2001SGR00018, funded by the Dursi, Catalan Government. . An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference: *Aspects of the Philosophy of Christopher Peacocke*, Girona, march 2002. I thank José A. Díez, Manuel García-Carpintero, Chris Peacocke, and Manuel Pérez for valuable suggestions.

REFERENCES

- PEACOCKE, C., (1992), *A Study of Concepts*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press.
— (1993), 'How are A Priori Truths Possible?', *European Journal of Philosophy* 1(2), pp. 175-99
— (1998a), 'Implicit Conceptions, Understanding and Rationality', in Villanueva, E., *Philosophical Issues* vol. 9, *Concepts*, Ridgeview, Atascadero, pp. 43-89.
— (1998b), 'Implicit Conceptions, the *A Priori*, and the Identity of Concept', in Villanueva, E., *Philosophical Issues* vol. 9: *Concepts*, Ridgeview, Atascadero, pp. 121-49
SCHIFFER, S., (1998), 'Doubts about Implicit Conceptions', in Villanueva, E., *Philosophical Issues* vol. 9, *Concepts*, Ridgeview, Atascadero, pp. 89-91.