



The Social Life of Concepts

Review by Tiatemsu Longkumer

Andrew Brandel & Marco Motta, eds. 2021. *Living with Concepts: Anthropology in the Grip of Reality*. New York: Fordham University Press, 338 pp., ISBN: 978-0-82329-427-5

Anthropology has one of its contours in dealing with how humans use and embody concepts in their social reality. Joel Robbins (2020) argues that even though anthropologists are mindful of where their concepts are coming from, anthropology did not have the founding debate about “concept formation.” *Living with Concepts* brings philosophers and anthropologists together to understand different aspects of concepts such as: What are concepts? How are they made? What do they do? What do we mean when we talk about concepts? Each chapter expounds on different aspects of concepts in relation to life.

Sandra Laugier, in chapter 1, tries to juxtapose philosophy with the everyday textures of being human through reading works by Emerson, Cavell, and Diamond. She delves into the human ability to think and the calibration required to be part of the world. In doing so, Laugier explores “concept” and “experience,” pointing to the experiential aspect of concept called “conceptual sensibility” in trying to understand concepts in relation to lived experiences. Rasmus Dyring and Thomas Wentzer, in chapter 2, engage with anthropologists working on the ontological turn and ask the question, “What is human?” While asking the question in relation to concepts, they delve into philosophical anthropology to understand the formation of concepts as tied to the “formation of life” which situates concepts as product and process of conceptualization. Such formation leads them to see concepts as a process of conceptualization whereby understanding conceptualization as “an experiential responsiveness to the demands that life puts on the living.”

Veena Das, in chapter 3, ponders on the relationship between the notion of concept and the real. She further asks how semiotic apparatuses portray the real and how different pictures of reality might signify different practices and conceptual formation. While delving into these questions, Das suggests that the normative bounds of a concept are disclosed through its projection into a new context which needn't refer back to a rule as it belongs to an "autonomous stratum." Das goes on to further suggest that "a concept is not simply capturing what is there but might be thought of as roaming in the space of possibilities" (p. 104).

While reading Claude Levi-Strauss and Marcel Griaule, Andrew Brandel, in chapter 4, ponders anthropology's history of following a rule and the desire to describe phenomena that went against the use of concept in practice. In trying to make his case, Brandel meditates on how anthropologists receive texts and claims that the "empirical encounter with texts is already conceptual." Such a claim alludes to the phenomena where providing a definition may run against the use of concept in practice. Brandel argues that through our conceptual practice, "we intuit a horizon of use," revealing the normativity of concepts. Jocelyn Benoist, in chapter 5, faces the question "Does concept give us reality?" Benoist while reflecting on the question suggests that philosophy occupies itself with concepts and not reality, further proposing that concepts are "norms that have been put upon reality" which put "reality into play" at the same time that they put us in a position to be "right in its regard." As an illustration of what "life with concepts" might look like Marco Motta, in chapter 6, looks at "life with zombies" in Haiti and problematizes the anthropological account of "reality" by thinking through the relationship between reality and the imagined. Motta further complicates the notion of imagination by opening up to the notion of experience and juxtaposing it as a component of the real. Such problematization and different configurations of relations between concept and experience complicate the division between imagination and reality.

Michael J. Puett, in chapter 7, while critically reading Zhu Xi, asks the question of the coherence of concepts in the world. Puett argues that life with concepts is not about expressing a coherent worldview but obtaining new possibilities by working with the endlessly fragile construction of the world. Describing the fragility of lifeworlds, Michael D. Jackson, in chapter 8, deliberates on the loss of concepts that may happen through moments of crisis and transition, asking if "the loss

of a loved one, of a physical ability, of a faith or fortune, or home or homeland...may also be precipitated by the loss of concepts” (p. 197). Jackson also alludes to concepts, images, and quasi-humans as alternative ways of giving form to “inchoate experiences,” bringing together the aspect of conceptual and lived reality. Thus, propounding that concept formation in human experience, concrete or abstract, makes life thinkable and manageable even in difficult situations. Michael Lambek, in chapter 9, reflecting on Mayotte’s understanding of sorcery, tries to understand sorcery from the lens of “ordinary ethics,” which focuses on ethical life rather than the hard questions of ethics. Through such reflection, Lambek tries to assert how anthropological thinking emerges and is tested through their fieldwork. For Lambek, ethics is a form of exercising practical judgment, and concepts enable us to use certain words in certain circumstances. Thus, the reality of a concept (here, sorcery) cannot be settled within a single language game, establishing a connection between ethics and concepts in everyday life.

Michael Cordey, in chapter 10, delineates the concept of ethical decision-making through an example from medicine and health policy called shared decision making (SDM). He bases his argument on fieldwork conducted in a Swiss neurorehabilitation hospital among people who are waking up from a coma and asks the medical professional if “treating a patient’s pneumonia with an antibiotic constitutes a ‘futile’ intervention” (p. 244). Cordey suggests that there constitutes a “futile” intervention with a particular “texture” that can be heard through their tone of voice in such treatment. Consequently, Cordey argues against the rational and deliberative view of decision-making in an ordinary everyday life setting. The question of ethics, as Cordey argues, is “about the difficulties to stitch together what really matters to people in particular situation” as they work through the different “textures” of “futility” (p. 244). Lotte Buch Segal, in chapter 11, explores the expression of concepts in the form of pain caused by violence. Such expression while forming a community also reveals a form of fragility and vulnerability as it demands the acknowledgment of the other. Buch Segal tries to understand such sensation in terms of “secondary traumatization” through the process of “bearing and being with the voice of others,” recognizing the “fragility” of language. She argues that “anthropological theory of being with the pain of others as a shared language hinged on the knowledge that working with people in immense pain is knowing the failure of the voice and the simultaneous return of it” (pp. 274-

275). Thus, expression of pain is a form of demand on the witness that subsumes an acknowledgement of the pain of the other and the other itself.

An interesting aspect of the book is that each chapter is in dialogue with another, where certain lines of thought are resonated throughout the chapters. The common thread across each chapter is the implicit critique that concepts can be manipulated at will, and that concepts are equivalent to, or function as, a sign. Each chapter is a product of extensive dialogue amongst the authors, and each contribution has certain foundational premises that are implicitly or explicitly agreed upon. In doing so, the book puts forward three views of concepts: Firstly, concepts are tools that enable us to translate between experiences, unraveling an otherwise hidden reality; secondly, concepts tell us something about what is going on in reality over there; and thirdly, concepts are not merely signs but are also an affective aspect of lived reality. The books' proposal goes beyond the classical view of concepts - which proposes that concepts are encapsulated in definitions where philosophy and other sciences are to discover and sharpen the definition of concepts - while voicing different opinions on how their views apply contextually in relation to life. The diversity of opinions further reinstates the notion that concepts are intimately linked with life in particular and "social ontology" (Epstein 2015) in general. The discussion can be furthered by trying to understand "concepts" as "social kinds" through "metamodernism" (Josephson Storm 2021).

This book is not just a rhetorical dabble on concepts, but it expounds on how concepts come to life in everyday human and non-human interaction. As the reader goes through each chapter, it will be made clear that this book is not just a different take on what concepts are but also what concepts do. A book like this can be recommended to university-level students and scholars across any discipline. For anthropologists, it is a must-read irrespective of the branch one belongs to.

Works Cited

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