

BEGRIFF (GERMAN)

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

- **CONCEPT** [CONCEPTUS, CONCETTO], 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

