The Origin of Concepts

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What allows humans to ponder the causes and cure of global warming or of pancreatic cancer? As a matter of logic, a theory of concept acquisition must specify the innate representational primitives that are the input to learning, must describe how representational capacities change with development, and must characterize learning mechanisms that underlie these changes. I will defend three theses concerning conceptual development.

1. There are innate primitives with conceptual content. I will characterize and provide evidence for systems of core cognition.

2. Conceptual development involves discontinuities in which learning results in representations with more expressive power than, or that are incommensurable with, those that are the input to the learning process.

3. One learning mechanism that underlies conceptual discontinuity is Quinian bootstrapping. I will characterize this bootstrapping mechanism and illustrate how it underlies conceptual change.