I here explore Wayne Davis’s (2003) proposal that concepts and (Fregean) propositions are event types. I argue that this simple (if unobvious) proposal lends itself to an attractively simple yet powerful overall theory of concepts, which, together with plausible auxiliary assumptions, immediately answers several fundamental questions about concepts.

I take concepts to be constituents of thoughts (propositions), and I take all concepts to be either syntactically simple or complex, the latter being composed ultimately of simple concepts. Each concept belongs to some syntactic category (predicative, propositional, individual, propositional-operator, and so on) and I take propositions, the objects of the attitudes, to be simply concepts of the propositional category. For simplicity, I will assume here that the syntactic categories are those of first-order logic.

The theory I want to advance holds that:

1. Concepts are mental event types
2. To undergo such a mental event is to entertain the relevant concept
3. Complex concepts are act-types of conjoining, in a certain sense, the concepts immediately involved in the concept in question.
4. A concept is individuated by its entertaining (i.e., undergoing) conditions, to the effect that it plays a certain inferential (conceptual, functional) role

I will argue that (1)-(4) constitute a very simple theory with considerable scope. Its simplicity is partly due to the fact that (2)-(4) can be motivated on the basis of claim (1) plus independently plausible assumptions.

Claim (2) answers the question, “If concepts are event types, what kind of event types are they?” An obvious way of answering this question goes by saying what it is to undergo the relevant event type. I propose, then, that to undergo a concept is to entertain it. While it is not customary to speak of entertaining concepts, I intend this to be understood in analogy with entertaining propositions. I argue that other event types related to propositions (asserting, judging, assuming, etc.) would be arbitrary as candidates for being identified with undergoing concepts. Entertaining is non-arbitrary because it is the most general event type, in the sense that any other event type related to a proposition entails entertaining it.

This does not entail, however, that it is possible to entertain a (non-propositional) concept in isolation; perhaps one can do so only in the course of entertaining proposition. It is perhaps also not possible to merely entertain a proposition, i.e., to entertain it without performing some other mental act upon it (e.g., judging, assuming, etc.). Perhaps it is even the case that assuming, asserting, judging, etc., are merely ways of entertaining propositions. This would explain why they all entail entertaining.

This theory is an instance of the now-popular “act-type theory of propositions” of Scott Soames (2015). Hanks’ (2015) theory is similar, but identifies the propositions
with judgings, rather than entertainings. Both of those theories are Russellian, however, whereas mine is Fregean, i.e., it takes propositions to be built up of concepts rather than objects, properties, and relations.

On a Fregean conception, it is reasonable to assume that propositions are the same general kind of entity as the concepts that constitute them. Thus, if propositions are event types of entertaining in the sense explained, concepts are, too.

Claim (3) should be thought of as following directly from the claim that concepts are event types plus the obvious claim that complex concepts are “built out of” and constituted by less complex concepts, ultimately simple ones. If complex concepts are event types, as per (1), complex concepts must be event types thus involving simpler event types. My claim that a complex event type is an event (or act) type of conjoining its constituent simpler concepts (in a certain order) should be seen as a stipulation. We could say that conjoining is just that multigrade relation R such that the event type of entering R with the concepts x, y, z, … in that order = the complex concept whose immediate constituents are x, y, z, … (occurring in that order). With the further assumptions that all concepts are syntactically like those of first-order logic and that the first relatum of conjoining is always an incomplete concept, followed by concepts saturating it, we immediately get a handy way of referring to complex concepts. Let E[x, y1, …, yn] be the act type of entering relation x to entities y1, …, yn (in that order). Letting “C” abbreviate “conjoining”, and using small caps refer to simple concepts, we now have identities like,

the proposition that John loves Mary and Socrates is wise =
= E[C, and, E[C, love, John, Mary], E[C, wise, Socrates]],

etc.

Claim (4) follows from (1) and (2) together with the plausible assumption that event types can be individuated by the conditions of undergoing them (just as, e.g., properties can be individuated by the conditions of instantiating them). While this idea is compatible with a truth-theoretic individuation of concepts, it lends itself especially well to Conceptual Role Semantics (CRS). Claim (3) is of course similar to Peacocke’s view that concepts can be individuated by their possession conditions, but (3) has an advantage in that it is so obvious, given (1) and (2), how to answer the question, “Why can concepts be individuated by their entertaining conditions? An analogous move on behalf of Peacocke’s theory, as we will see, has considerable problems. The CRS concept individuations made available via claim (3) can take the following form:

x entertains (undergoes) C iff x undergoes some event type e, such that e plays role R in x,

where “e plays role R in x” stands proxy for a complex open sentence, which can be varied in many ways, corresponding to the many different CRS proposals. To illustrate, an individuation of and might be roughly of the form,

x entertains (undergoes) and iff x undergoes some event type e, such that, for all p, q, whenever x believes E[e, p, q] and …, x will believe p …
where the variables “p” and “q” can unproblematically be bound by first-order quantifiers ranging over propositions. Complex concepts are individuated by their undergoing conditions, which are simply to the effect that one conjoin the constituent concepts in the right order.

This view lends itself to more plausible versions of such theories proposed in the psychological literature about perceptual similarity spaces (Gärdenfors), prototypes, and bodies of knowledge (Prinz). These theories identify concepts with these various entities. What is right about them, in my view, is that some concepts can only be individuated by appeal to one of these entities. For instance, the concept cat can only be individuated by reference to the perceptual similarity space related to cats.

But the connection between concepts and these entities cannot be identity. For concepts are very easily accessed, whereas the other entities are not. Also, the identity theses fail to acknowledge the obvious role that belief plays in connecting concepts with these other entities. To wit, the obvious way in which concepts are connected to similarity spaces is, roughly, that perceptions with parts belonging to one of the relevant similarity spaces tend to produce a relevant belief (e.g., the belief that there is a cat in front of one, if one has a perception involving the similarity space of cats).

The event type theory offers a more plausible way of individuating concepts in terms of similarity spaces, prototypes, or bodies of knowledge:

\[ x \text{ undergoes/entertains cat iff: } x \text{ undergoes some event type } e \text{ such that } x \text{ is disposed, for every mental demonstrative } d, \text{ to believe } E[C, e, d] \text{ when undergoing a perception in which } d \text{ is “in” CAT.} \]

\[ x \text{ undergoes/entertains electron iff: } x \text{ undergoes some event type } e \text{ such that } x \text{ believes (most of) the propositions, } E[C, ..., e, ...], E[C, ---, e, ---], ... \]

(Here, one of these propositions might be the proposition that every electron has negative charge, and so on.)

These individuations of concepts also provide a reply to Machery’s complaint that concepts, on these theories, end up as too disparate to be a useful posit. For on the above account, all concepts are event types of entertaining, individuated by their entertaining conditions, which are, in turn, to the effect that the event type plays a certain cognitive roles. Their disparity concerns merely the difference of these roles.