



Carleton University | Department of Philosophy

colloquium

# "LEARNING INCOMMENSURATE CONCEPTS"

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HAYLEY CLATTERBUCK  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Jerry Fodor famously argued that it is impossible to learn new concepts that cannot be defined in terms of those concepts with which one began. Hence, it follows that concepts such as *avocado* or *electron* cannot be learned. More generally, a long tradition of philosophical arguments have purported to show that there cannot be rational transitions between incommensurable sets of concepts. Given the data of radical concept change in both science and cognitive development, explaining how such concepts can be learned has been an important area of research. I argue that several prominent responses to Fodor's problem are promising but incomplete. I buttress these responses by showing how modern machine learning algorithms manage to learn incommensurate concepts and draw lessons for understanding the structure of human concepts and how they can be learned.

**FRIDAY, JANUARY 29, 2021  
3:00 P.M. EST**

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