similar warrant our treating them as the same, as interchangeable units, qua referents of a given concept?

The Objectivist Theory

Ayn Rand's theory of similarity grounds her Objectivist theory of concepts. She defines similarity as: "the relationship between two or more existents which possess the same characteristic(s), but in different measure or degree." [ITOE, 13]

Things that are similar differ *quantitatively*. The blue of a blueberry is not *identical* to the blue of the sky, but the two differ quantitatively, in measurable ways. A given blueberry is a darker blue than the sky; the hue of the blueberry has more red in it, shading towards purple; the sky's blue is brighter than the blueberry's. These are differences in degree along the three measurable axes: hue, saturation, and brightness. Modern computers usually provide a color-setting dialog box that uses numbers from 0 to 255 to specify the setting of each of these three parameters. Any of the colors that we can see can be specified by a trio of these three numbers. (On my monitor, blueberry blue is approximately 139, 142, 74; sky blue is 139, 200, 160.) Color differences are a matter of *measurements.*

Consider now the case of similar *entities*. The similarity of a particular beagle to a particular collie is more complex, but still one of measurable quantity. The beagle is smaller and stouter; the beagle's hair is shorter and straighter than the collie's; the collie's nose is longer and more tapering; the beagle's nose is shorter and blunter; the collie's bark is lower-pitched; etc. There is no non-specific "dogginess" lodged in the beagle and the collie. They differ in every respect, but the differences are in *how much* of each characteristic — size, straightness of hair, ratio of length to width of nose — they possess. The differences are differences in the measurements of commensurable characteristics.

In contrast, a very young child beginning to form concepts would not perceive a pig and a collie to be similar. Why not, if similarity is an issue of quantitative differences? After all, the pig's differences from the collie are also measurable — the pig is fatter, pinker, with a measurably different shape, etc.

The answer to this question lies in a cognitive process neglected by traditional theorists: *differentiation*. Similarity is inherently perceived against a background of difference. As I have stressed, consciousness is a difference-detector. When a naïve, pre-conceptual child attends to two items, it is their

differences, not their similarities, that will be prominent. Although a beagle and a collie are similar, putting them side by side serves to focus attention on their differences (for a pre-conceptual child). But sensitivity to difference can be turned to advantage here. When the child observes a beagle, a collie, and a pig, the huge differences between the pig and the dogs leap to the foreground of awareness, making the two dogs appear similar. The pig appears to be different in kind from the two dogs, while the dogs appear to differ from each other only in degree — i.e., similar in contrast to the pig. Even though a conceptually advanced adult observer could say that *all three* animals have commensurable characteristics (color, shape, weight), for the beginning conceptualizer, the difference that dominates his attention is the difference between the two dogs and the pig.

In the same manner, two shades of blue put side by side will simply be perceived as different, but when a contrasting color, such as green, is added to the comparison, the two shades of blue appear similar, appear to go together, as opposed to the particular green that they are being contrasted to. Hue is the commensurable characteristic possessed by all three colors, so hue serves as the background that pushes into the foreground the marked difference between the blues and the green.

The grasp of similarity requires a minimum of three concretes having a commensurable characteristic(s): two whose measurements differ slightly and one that differs greatly in measurement from both.

The arch example is location. Is the Empire State Building near to or far from the Chrysler Building? That depends — it depends on what we are comparing them to. If the comparison is to a location across the street from the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building is far. If the comparison is to the Sears Tower in Chicago, the two Manhattan buildings are near to each other. And if the comparison is to the location of a mountain on Mars, all three buildings are near to each other.

This can be represented graphically:

Considered by themselves, A and B are in different places. Considered in contrast to C, A and B, though not in the *identical* place, are seen as falling in the same general region — i.e., at the left end of the line.