A Theory of How Heuristics Work in Cognition

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Abstract: I provide a general cognitive architecture that enables heuristic reasoning. I argue that heuristics operate by exploiting informationally rich, specialized systems of knowledge. An analysis reveals that these knowledge systems are concepts. The notion of concepts I adopt is unlike many of the common philosophical theories; it is an adaptation from a theory envisioned by psychologist Lawrence Barsalou, who views concepts as inherently perceptual. I critically engage this theory of concepts and assess it against the increasingly popular file metaphor of cognition, which views concepts as files that contain collections of information about their referents. The resulting view is that concepts are highly organized collections of linguistically coded and perceptual information. The implication with respect to heuristic cognition is that the informational content of our concepts is organized in such a way that there exist patterns of relations among concepts which guide heuristic processes.