

**EUROPEAN *REVIEW* OF PHILOSOPHY**

# EUROPEAN REVIEW OF PHILOSOPHY

erp-review.org

Established in Geneva in 1994, the European Review of Philosophy is a peer-reviewed journal edited yearly at the Jean Nicod Institute, Paris. It publishes thematic volumes on philosophical and foundational issues in cognitive science.

## Editor-in-Chief

Dario Taraborelli, *University College London*

## Executive Editors

Paul Egré, *CNRS*

Christophe Heintz, *EHESS*

Benjamin Q. Sylvand, *University of Oxford*

## Associate Editors

Nicolas J. Bullot, *University of Toronto*

Christine van Geen, *University of Rouen*

Damian Justo, *EHESS*

Nausicaa Pouscoulous, *EHESS*

Frédérique de Vignemont, *CNRS*

## Advisory Board

Paul Bloom, *Yale University*

John Campbell, *University of California, Berkeley*

Susan Carey, *Harvard University*

David Chalmers, *Australian National University*

Martin Davies, *Australian National University*

Alvin Goldman, *Rutgers University*

Ray Jackendoff, *Tufts University*

Marc Jeannerod, *Institut de Sciences Cognitives, Lyon*

Alan Leslie, *Rutgers University*

Diego Marconi, *University of Eastern Piedmont*

Kevin Mulligan, *University of Geneva*

Alva Noë, *University of California, Berkeley*

Christopher Peacocke, *Columbia University*

John Perry, *Stanford University*

Daniel Povinelli, *University of Louisiana*

Jesse Prinz, *University of North Carolina*

Zenon Pylyshyn, *Rutgers University*

Brian Scholl, *Yale University*

Elizabeth Spelke, *Harvard University*

Achille Varzi, *Columbia University*

Timothy Williamson, *New College, Oxford*

Deirdre Wilson, *University College London*

# EUROPEAN *REVIEW* OF PHILOSOPHY



## The Structure of Nonconceptual Content

**6**

*edited by*  
*Christine van Geen &*  
*Frédérique de Vignemont*

Copyright © 2006  
CSLI Publications  
Center for the Study of Language and Information  
Leland Stanford Junior University  
Printed in the United States  
10 09 08 07 06 1 2 3 4 5

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

European review of philosophy /  
edited by Christine van Geen and Frédérique de Vignemont.  
Volume 6, the structure of nonconceptual content.  
ISSN 1098-7274

Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN-13 978-1-57586-530-0 (paperback)  
ISBN-10 1-57586-530-0 (paperback)

For a list of volumes in this series, please visit  
<http://cslipublications.stanford.edu/site/EURO.html>

For a presentation of this series, forthcoming issues  
and calls for papers, please visit  
<http://www.erp-review.org>

The publication of this volume was made possible through a CNRS grant from the Réseau Thématique Pluridisciplinaire “Langage Naturel, Logique et Philosophie du Langage,” coordinated by Philip Miller. We are most grateful to Philip Miller and Claire Beyssade for this financial support.

CSLI was founded in 1983 by researchers from Stanford University, SRI International, and Xerox PARC to further the research and development of integrated theories of language, information, and computation. CSLI headquarters and CSLI Publications are located on the campus of Stanford University.

CSLI Publications reports new developments in the study of language, information, and computation. Please visit our web site at  
<http://cslipublications.stanford.edu/>

for comments on this and other titles, as well as for changes  
and corrections by the authors, editors, and publisher.

---

# Contents

## *The Structure of Nonconceptual Content*

- 1 Introduction / 1**  
CHRISTINE VAN GEEN AND FRÉDÉRIQUE DE VIGNEMONT
- 2 The Thesis of Nonconceptual Content / 7**  
MICHAEL TYE
- 3 Nonconceptual Epicycles / 31**  
SONIA SEDIVY
- 4 Nonconceptual Modes of Presentations / 65**  
MANUEL GARCIA-CARPINTERO
- 5 Why Nonconceptual Content Cannot Be Immune to Error  
through Misidentification / 81**  
ROBLIN MEEKS
- 6 Les Liaisons Dangereuses or How Not to Construe  
Nonconceptual Content / 101**  
ALISON J. CREESE AND JULIEN A. DEONNA



---

# Introduction

CHRISTINE VAN GEEN AND FRÉDÉRIQUE DE VIGNEMONT

“Let me take it in the best light, in the light in which it may be understood,” says one Bennett sister to the other, in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*,<sup>1</sup> as she is confronted with a lover’s puzzling behavior.

We also had one such puzzle, and set out to gather answers and elucidations through the present volume. We were much in favor of nonconceptualism, but happened to have trouble setting it in the desirable light of unreserved understanding. We thought the objections raised against conceptualism most convincing, and founded on good empirical evidence. The positive account of nonconceptualism we found less satisfactory: the transition between nonconceptual content and conceptual content did not appear to be at all devoid of empty rhetoric and metaphors. It is one thing to show that perception is more fine-grained than our ability to conceptualize, i.e. identify, recognize and classify. It is another thing to understand how perception grounds rational thought, how the nonconceptual somehow becomes conceptual. Had we not been so convinced by nonconceptualism, we might have left things like that and embraced conceptualism. But conceptualists, on the other hand, have had a lot to say on the positive side of their theory, and much less to say in response to the very precise and empirically founded objections raised by nonconceptualists against their view. More particularly, following Sellars and McDowell, the founding fathers of conceptualism, most of the conceptualists remain far from psychology and from the idiom of empirical studies. The difference of idiom makes the debate even more difficult and more confusing.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1813, 1990, Oxford University Press, p. 123.

For all these reasons, we were interested in asking for more details about the positive account of the structure of nonconceptual content. The question was: how far can one carry the homomorphism between nonconceptual and conceptual content? On the one hand, in order to explain the transition from the former to the latter, one may want to maximize the analogy between the two structures. Nonconceptual perception cannot be raw material for thoughts if it is too raw. It needs to be somehow conceptualizable. For instance, nonconceptual content has been described in terms of ‘protopositions’, a claim that deserves to be formally developed. But again the analogy should not go too far, if nonconceptual content is to retain its specificity – provided that it does indeed make sense to defend its existence. This implies to minimize the analogy.

Both nonconceptual content and conceptual content are characterized by their propositional character, according to nonconceptualists. However, does this necessarily mean that they both have a predicative structure and, if so, how could we distinguish nonconceptual and conceptual contents? And is there any empirical evidence that argues for the fact that nonconceptual contents are apprehended as structured, rather than as undifferentiated wholes? Conversely, one may ask conceptualists whether they are able to show that there is a good reason why the nonconceptualists’ account of the transition between perception and reason is not satisfactory.

So there seemed to be a need for both conceptualist and nonconceptualist to elaborate their ideas on the structure of nonconceptual content. More particularly, we thought that the former needed to develop arguments against nonconceptual content based on problems caused *a priori* by any attempt to describe its structure, while the latter would have to specify the conditions of possibility for the transition between nonconceptual and conceptual content.

This is how our work began. Did we retain our initial nonconceptualist position and get the nonconceptualist elaboration we were hoping for? Or did the conceptualists convince us we would never get that? Shortly after one daughter makes the aforementioned declaration, Mr. Bennett tells the other that it is most desirable “to be crossed in love a little now and then.”<sup>2</sup> However wise or unwise that may be, and even more important to us than the changes our philosophical allegiances have undergone, we do hope that this volume might truly give a clearer understanding of the debate on the relevance of nonconceptual content, which is such a crucial debate, both to philosophy and to psychology. Technical and specialized though it may appear in the phrases ‘nonconceptual content’ and ‘conceptual content’, what

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



is at stake is no less than our whole understanding of the relation between the mind and the senses.

This volume includes five papers both from conceptualists and nonconceptualists. We started out by inviting Michael Tye and Sonia Sedivy, the former a nonconceptualist, the latter a conceptualist, to contribute a paper to this issue. Manuel Garcia-Carpintero, Roblin Meeks, Alison Creese and Julien Deonna have answered our call for papers.

Michael Tye (University of Texas) has been one of the main proponents of the thesis of nonconceptual content<sup>3</sup> (Tye, 1995, 2000). He has argued that the phenomenal character of conscious experiences is “one and the same as” (1) Poised (2) Abstract (3) Nonconceptual and (4) Intentional content (PANIC). Here, Tye makes a special effort to go into the detail of the motivations for and the nature of nonconceptual content. On the one hand, he recapitulates the arguments in favor of nonconceptual content, and more particularly the debate about the fineness of grain. Can it be explained in terms of indexical concepts or is it conclusive evidence for nonconceptual content? On the other hand, he analyzes different possible versions of the nonconceptual thesis. He distinguishes three alternatives: 1) experiences are nonconceptual states with conceptual contents; 2) experiences are nonconceptual states with fine-grained nonconceptual contents; 3) experiences are nonconceptual states with coarse-grained nonconceptual contents. He defends the last version. Tye here provides an original and fine-grained (but still conceptual) account of the nonconceptualist thesis.

Sonia Sedivy’s (University of Toronto) works center on the philosophy of mind, of perception, on epistemology and on the philosophy of art. She has recently created a ‘space of reasons’ for the conceptualist thesis she fully articulates in this volume, mainly in the two following papers: “Wittgenstein’s Diagnosis of Empiricism’s Third Dogma”,<sup>4</sup> and “Minds: Contents without Vehicles.”<sup>5</sup> The paper we are editing bridges the gap between the language of empirically minded nonconceptualists and the language of supposedly epistemically oriented conceptualists - those in the wake of John McDowell and Wilfrid Sellars. Sonia Sedivy renews the way in which the debate on nonconceptual content has been spelled out. Her title “Nonconcep-

---

<sup>3</sup> See Tye, M. 1995. *Ten problems of consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press  
Tye, M. 2003. *Consciousness and Persons*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press

<sup>4</sup> 2004a: *Philosophical Psychology* 17, 2, pp. 149-179.

<sup>5</sup> 2004b: *Philosophical Investigations*, 27, 1 pp. 1-33.

tual epicycles” suggests the need of a paradigm shift. This shift is made explicit in this very article.

The argument is the following. Sedivy argues that perception is a mode of engagement with individuals and their determinate properties. Perceptual content involves determinate properties in a way that relies on our conceptual capacities no less than on the properties. The “richness” of perceptual experience is explained as a distinctive individual and property involving content. This position is developed in three steps: (i) novel phenomenological description of lived experience; (ii) detailed reconstruction of Gareth Evans’ proposal that we are capable of genuinely singular thought that involves individuals under modes of presentation; (iii) re-consideration of the re-identification condition on conceptual contents.

Manuel Garcia-Carpintero (University of Barcelona), who has already published a paper in the European review of Philosophy (1999), has published influential works on the epistemological and ontological bases of the theory of reference.

Garcia-Carpintero criticizes an argument in Peacocke’s nonconceptualist theory of mind. Peacocke distinguishes between *ways* qualities (or rather: instances of qualities) are perceived as such and Fregean *senses*. This distinction is instrumental in his establishing the controversial difference between nonconceptual content and conceptual content. Indeed, nonconceptual contents also involve ways in which we perceive the instances of qualities that we perceive. If such ways are senses, which are by definition conceptual, the distinction between conceptual content and nonconceptual content falls apart. Garcia-Carpintero shows how ‘ways’ (of perceiving instances of qualities) and ‘senses’ are not to be distinguished as Peacocke does. This analysis entails an original sketch of the distinction between conceptual content and nonconceptual content, in which Garcia-Carpintero suggests to rename nonconceptual contents ‘states of *pre-judgmental awareness*.’

Roblin Meeks (Princeton University) has done his Ph.D. on self-consciousness and the principle of immunity to error through misidentification at City University of New York with David Rosenthal. Here, he focuses on the conditions of possibility of first-person self-ascriptions in non-linguistic creatures such as lobsters and infants. Do they lack self-consciousness due to their lack of the first-person concept? Meeks analyzes Bermudez’s nonconceptual account of first-person self-ascriptions. He highlights one difficulty encountered by Bermudez. As plausible as it sounds, Bermudez’s view still might claim too much for non-linguistic creatures.

First-person contents are both nonconceptual and immune to error through misidentification relative to the first-person (i.e. one cannot be mistaken about who is doing the thinking or speaking). But this assumes that non-conceptual contents have a subject-predicate structure like conceptual contents. Is it not pushing too far the analogy between the two kinds of contents? Meeks here reviews the different possibilities to avoid this solution to the problem of self-consciousness in non-linguistic creatures.

Alison Creese (Open University) and Julien Deonna (University of Lausanne) are both interested in emotions. Like Meeks, they focus here on Bermudez's nonconceptual thesis, but highlighting a different difficulty, i.e., the problem of compositionality. Compositionality has been considered one of the main features of concepts (e.g. Evans' Principle of Generality). However, Bermudez claims that nonconceptual contents have still a 'limited capacity for recombability'. But in what sense do nonconceptual contents then differ from conceptual contents? In other words, what kinds of inferences can a dog make? Creese and Deonna provide two interpretations of Bermudez's claim. Either the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual is defined as the difference between global and partial recombability. Or it is a question of degree of access to voluntary control. According to Creese and Deonna, the former hypothesis is not sustainable. The isomorphism between nonconceptual and conceptual content is too strong. The latter hypothesis provides a real criterion to distinguish between conceptual and nonconceptual contents, but the motivations of this specific criterion are not clear. Creese and Deonna provide in this paper a systematic critical analysis of the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual contents.



---

# The Thesis of Nonconceptual Content

MICHAEL TYE

“The triumph of hope over experience”

Samuel Johnson on second marriages

I suppose that substantive philosophical theses are much like second marriages. The philosophical thesis I wish to discuss in this paper is the thesis that experiences have nonconceptual content (hereafter the thesis of nonconceptual content). I shall not attempt to argue that all experiences have nonconceptual content nor that the only contents experiences have are nonconceptual. Instead, I want to flesh out the thesis of nonconceptual content for experience in more detail than has been offered hitherto and to provide a variety of motivations for the view – motivations that are broader than those that are typically adduced.

## 1 Thought Content and Concept Possession

Before we can take up the question of what it is for an experience to have a nonconceptual content, some preliminary remarks are necessary on how I shall be using the terms “concept” and “thought content” in this essay. The content of a thought, as I shall understand it, is what is thought and intuitively what is thought individuates in a fine-grained way. Consider the case of the thought that coriander is a spice. Intuitively, what I think when I have this thought is not what I think, when I think that cilantro is a spice. The two thoughts play different roles in rationalizing explanations. This is why it is possible for me to *discover* that coriander is cilantro. The concepts CORIANDER and CILANTRO have the same referent, but the way in which the referent is presented in the two cases is different. One who thinks

*European Review of Philosophy*  
Vol. 6: The Structure of Nonconceptual Content  
Christine van Geen and Frédérique de Vignemont (eds.).  
Copyright © 2006, CSLI Publications.

of coriander (cilantro) as coriander thinks of it under a different guise or in a different way from one who thinks of it as cilantro. So, the content of the one thought is different from the content of the other.

In general, I take thought contents to be indicated by the “that”-clauses used to attribute thoughts. Moreover, in the first person case, I take the content attributed via the “that”-clause to be the content of the thought, assuming that the thought ascription is true.<sup>1</sup> In the third person case, the situation is more complicated. Here the thought ascription is sometimes counted as true even if the content of the thought is not the same as the content attributed, so long as there is sufficient similarity between the two. Accordingly, I take the “that”-clause in such a case to indicate that the thought has a content that, in the given context, is sufficiently similar to the content of the sentence embedded in the “that”-clause.

As I use the term “concept”, concepts are not linguistic terms in a public language. They are mental representations of a sort that can occur in thought.<sup>2</sup> Thoughts are composed of concepts and the contents of concepts individuate in a fine-grained way. As illustrated in the case above of the concepts CILANTRO and CORIANDER, concepts that refer to the same entities can differ in their content. Indeed, concepts can differ in their content even if they refer to the same entity in all possible worlds. For example, the concept HESPERUS has a different content from the concept PHOSPHORUS, even though they both refer to the planet Venus in all possible worlds. This is why the thought that Hesperus is a planet is a different thought from the thought that Phosphorus is a planet. Similar comments apply to the concept FOUR and the concept TWO TIMES TWO. A small child who can count to four has the former concept; but she may not yet have learned how to multiply and thus may lack the latter concept. Such a child can think the thought that four is greater than three without being able to think the thought that two times two is greater than three. Likewise, in my view, the concept FORTNIGHT has a different content from the concept FOURTEEN DAYS. One might be misinformed and believe that a fortnight is ten days without thereby believing that fourteen days is ten days. Concepts of which one has a partial understanding are still concepts one may exercise in belief and thought.

So far I have not said anything directly about concept *possession*. This too merits some brief preliminary discussion. What is it for a given concept

---

<sup>1</sup> This is to oversimplify a little. A further assumption is that the thought ascribed is a present thought. (We have privileged access to the contents of our present thoughts, not to the contents of our past ones. See here McLaughlin and Tye 1998). Attributions of past thought contents should be treated in the same way as third person attributions below.

<sup>2</sup> For other uses of the term “concept”, and a helpful discussion of nonconceptual content, see Byrne forthcoming.

to be a concept of *mine*? What is it for me to *possess* a concept? A straightforward answer is just this: I possess a given concept C if and only if I am able to exercise C in *my* thoughts. This answer is not very informative, however; for under what conditions can I exercise a concept in my thoughts? Given the phenomenon of partial understanding, the ability to exercise a concept in thought does not require full mastery of the concept. But this ability surely does require at least partial understanding of the concept. And once one has at least a partial understanding, one can employ the concept in thought. So, another answer to the above question is: I possess the concept C if and only if I have at least a partial understanding of C. On this intuitively attractive view, one cannot possess the concept FORTNIGHT, for example, unless one grasps that a fortnight is a period of time. Similarly, one cannot possess the ordinary concept RED unless one grasps that red is a color.

A stronger requirement on concept possession is given by Gareth Evans' Generality Constraint (1982). A simple way to state the constraint, idealizing away from limitations imposed by short-term memory and attention, is as follows: for any concepts a thinker possesses, the thinker can think any thought that can be formed from those concepts. This constraint places a necessary condition on concept possession and it is compatible with the above proposals so long as I am capable of exercising a concept C in my thoughts only if I am capable of thinking any thoughts that can be formed from combining C with other concepts I possess. Those who hold that thought is systematic and productive will happily grant this; but not everyone will accede to such a requirement.

It might be objected that I can possess concepts that are available *only* for use in experience (on a conceptualist view of experience) so that not all my concepts need be ones that I am capable of exercising in thought. But if experience is conceptual, it must be capable of standing as a reason for belief and the subject of each experience must be capable of appreciating its justificatory role, of inferring the content of the belief from the content of the experience. So, the subject must be capable of exercising concepts in thought that are deployed in experience after all.

## 2 The Thesis of Nonconceptual Content

What, then, is it for an experience E to have a nonconceptual content? The usual answer is as follows: first, E must have correctness conditions; secondly, it need not be the case that the subject S of the experience E has the concepts used in a canonical specification of the correctness conditions for E.

The first condition ensures that the experience has a representational content. If things are (or are not) the way they seem to the subject of the experience in undergoing it, then the experience is (or is not) accurate. The way things seem to the subject is the representational content of the experience.

The second condition is the one relevant to *nonconceptual* content. The first point to note here about this condition is that it does not preclude the nonconceptual content of an experience from being the content of a thought of another subject. For what makes the content nonconceptual for subject S is simply the fact that S need not herself have the relevant concepts and thus need not herself be in a position to form the relevant thought. Moreover, the nonconceptual content of an experience E of a subject S can even be the content of a thought of S, given the above thesis. All that is required in such a case is that S *need* not possess the pertinent concepts to undergo the experience: thus, were S to lose the concepts and with them the capacity to have such a thought, that would not preclude her from having the experience, if the content of the experience is nonconceptual.

It appears, then, that, given the usual understanding of the thesis of nonconceptual content, *as far as the nature of content itself goes*, there need be no distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content. All the thesis, as usually stated, requires is that experiences be contentful *nonconceptual states*, where a contentful nonconceptual state is a contentful state, the tokening of which does not involve the exercise of concepts.

We see therefore that the original thesis of nonconceptual content for experiences leaves open three possibilities: 1) experiences are nonconceptual states having conceptual contents (and thus are the same as thoughts along the content dimension only); 2) experiences are nonconceptual states having fine-grained nonconceptual contents (and thus are similar to thoughts along the content dimension); 3) experiences are nonconceptual states having coarse-grained contents (*robustly* nonconceptual contents, as I shall call them).

	CONCEPTUAL STATE	CONCEPTUAL CONTENT
CONCEPTUAL CONTENT	Experiences just like thoughts along both dimensions	Experiences share contents with thoughts
FINE-GRAINED NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENT		Experiences have contents similar to thoughts
COARSE-GRAINED NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENT		My proposal falls here



Since conceptual contents have fine-grained individuation conditions, those philosophers who embrace nonconceptualism for visual experience and who opt for alternative (1) above face the following very awkward question: how can an experience E of a subject S have a fine-grained content without being built from concepts? Those philosophers who embrace nonconceptualism and who opt for alternative (2) face the same awkward question and a further one, namely: how can an experience E of a subject S have a fine-grained content without that content being conceptual?<sup>3</sup> Perhaps these questions can be answered adequately, but I am skeptical. Accordingly, in my view, the advocate of nonconceptual content should embrace alternative (3) (or better a slightly more cautious formulation of alternative (3), namely that contentful experiences have contents that are robustly nonconceptual and, *insofar* as they have such contents, they are nonconceptual states<sup>4</sup>). For the remainder of the essay, this is the alternative I shall endorse.

But what is the robustly nonconceptual content of an experience? One answer is that such a content is a set of possible worlds. Another answer is that each robustly nonconceptual content is a possible state of affairs built out of worldly entities. Of these two answers, I accept the second, since it fits best with my views on the transparency of experience (Tye 1995, 2000, 2003). But for the purposes of the rest of this paper it will not matter whether the former unstructured account of content is preferred to the latter structured one.

On the structured account, it is plausible to break down the relevant possible states of affairs into two basic types: 1) structured complexes of specific particular items, properties, and relations; 2) structured existential states of affairs involving properties and relations (and plausibly the subject of the experience). Suppose, for example, I see the facing surface S of an object O and it looks red to me. My visual experience intuitively represents S as having the property of being red. At this level, my experience is accurate if and only if S is red. But my experience also has something important in common with certain other visual experiences not directed at S. Suppose, for example, that O is replaced with another object O' that looks just like O or that I am hallucinating a red surface so that phenomenally it is for me just as it is in seeing S. Intuitively, in all three cases, it seems to me that *there is* a red surface before me. At this phenomenal level, my experience is accurate if and only if there is a red surface before me.<sup>5</sup> This content is exis-

---

<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, why couldn't such a fine-grained content be the content of some thought?

<sup>4</sup> It is consistent with this claim that some experiences have conceptual contents too.

<sup>5</sup> In reality, of course, things will be much more complex than is indicated in this statement of correctness conditions. The existential content for the case in which I see surface S will

tential, not involving S, though it does also include the subject of the experience.

The structured account delivers *coarse-grained* contents in that representations with such contents (unlike representations having conceptual contents) cannot represent the same particulars, properties, and relations arranged in the same possible object-involving states of affairs or the same properties and relations involved in the same possible existential states of affairs and yet differ in content. On the unstructured account, coarseness of grain follows from the fact that sameness of content is guaranteed by sameness of correctness conditions in all possible worlds. The two accounts do not yield the same degree of coarseness of grain in robustly nonconceptual contents. For one thing, some may wish to deny that necessarily co-instantiated properties (and relations) are identical; and this view generates differences in content on the structured account that do not exist on the unstructured one. For another, on the structured account, some necessarily co-obtaining states of affairs can differ even if necessarily co-instantiated properties (and relations) are identical. Consider, for example, the object-involving state of affairs of X's being red and the necessarily co-obtaining state of affairs of there being exactly one actual F that is red, where "actual" is understood as a rigidifier and X is the actual F. These states of affairs differ in their structure and thus are different possible contents, on the structured account, but there is no difference in content on the unstructured alternative. The upshot is that the unstructured account is more coarse-grained than the structured one.

One worry that might be raised for my endorsement of the coarse-grained option is that it does not fit well with what historically was the central motivation for supposing that visual experiences have nonconceptual contents, namely the fine-grained character of our experiences of shades of color. To this I reply that considerations other than the experience of color shades can be used to motivate the nonconceptualist view of experience and further that it can be true both that there is a fineness of grain to our experiences of shades of color and that color experiences have coarse-grained contents. The first part of this reply is the topic of the next section. I return to the second in Section 4.

### 3 Motivations for the Thesis of Nonconceptual Content

I begin with the case of perceptual experiences with an evaluative character. Suppose you are walking towards the Plaza Hotel in New York and just before you get there, you encounter a large quantity of vomit on the side-

---

involve not just red but a determinate shade of red, a surface orientation, distance away of the apparent surface, 2-D location relative to the viewer, etc.

walk. You are appalled, of course. Why didn't someone clean it up? Afternoon tea is waiting for you at the hotel and you no longer feel like eating. The vomit smells bad to you. In so doing, it elicits in you an olfactory experience directed on the vomit and its odor. Your experience represents the odor of the vomit as bad. But it does not just represent the odor as bad simpliciter. It represents the odor as bad in a certain way, namely as foul. Your experience, then, has an evaluative content. It represents the vomit and its odor as having a kind of negative value, as being foul.<sup>6</sup>

Must one have the capacity to think a thought into which the concept FOUL enters in order for something to smell foul to one? Surely not. While it is certainly true that the perceptual concept foul is typically acquired by exposure to foul smells, intuitively it is not a necessary condition of those smells smelling foul to one that one already have the concept FOUL. In this connection, it is worth noting that new born babies react to Q-tips dipped in sulfur and held beneath their noses by grimacing and turning away. The obvious explanation for their doing so is that the sulfur smells foul to them. But that surely does not require that they already have the concept FOUL. They may well be built so as to acquire the concept FOUL via such encounters, but they do not have the concept the first time something smells foul to them. A plausible hypothesis, then, is that the experience of something's smelling foul has a nonconceptual representational content.

Consider the other side of the coin for a moment. A child as young as two months, upon tasting a little chocolate, typically behaves in a way that signifies that he/she wants more. The child will open and close its lips, push forward towards the chocolate, look happy. Why? The answer is that the chocolate tastes good. That's why the child wants more. The child's gustatory experience represents a certain taste and the child experiences that taste as good. The taste is experienced as good by the child in that the child undergoes an overall experience which represents the presence of the taste in the mouth and represents it as good. Intuitively, this is not a cognitive response. It does not require its subject to possess evaluative concepts.

I turn next to the case of emotional experiences. Emotional experiences are typically directed at things or persons. Suppose that you walk into the territory of an angry dog. The hair on the dog's neck is standing upright; the dog is growling at you and baring its teeth. In these circumstances, you experience fear and your feel is directed at the dog. Why? Well, the dog *seems* threatening or dangerous to you. That is how the dog is presented to you in your experience. It is part and parcel of your experience of fear. Your experience, then, in part represents the dog as having a value, that of being

---

<sup>6</sup> This value is not a moral value, of course.

threatening or dangerous. In my view, your experience also represents various bodily changes in you; for you feel your heart rate increasing, your legs going weak, your blood pressure rising. But these will not be our main focus here.

Now we know that there is an important connection between the amygdala — a small, almond shaped structure, located far beneath the surfaces of the two hemispheres — and emotional experience (Davis 1992; LeDoux 1992; Damasio 1994, 1999). The amygdala is very basic and ancient, and by way of it, the brain is wired to detect dangers both of a sort commonly encountered by our distant ancestors and of a sort we learn about as individuals today. It is also centrally implicated in the experience of anger. For example, removal of the amygdala in monkeys produces a total lack of anger and fear.

The amygdala processes information via subcortical pathways that allow for faster transmission than is found in the cerebral hemispheres (within which thought and decision-making occur). It thus permits us “to begin to respond to dangerous stimuli before we fully know what the stimulus is” (LeDoux 1996). This obviously has immediate survival value. The rat that has to take the time to form an appropriate sequence of thoughts before acting in the face of a cat about to pounce is a dead rat. Not so the rat that is wired to feel fear automatically in response to certain large moving shapes, of which the shape of the cat is one.

If the basic experience of fear is traceable to the operation of the amygdala and the amygdala operates without conceptual activity, then it seems that the experience of fear can occur and with it the representation of the value of being dangerous without its subject possessing the concept DANGEROUS (or the concept THREATENING). And if this is so, then on my version of nonconceptualism, *some* emotional experiences (though certainly not all) have robustly nonconceptual evaluative contents. Accordingly, evaluative properties can enter into the possible states of affairs that are robustly nonconceptual contents of experiences (on the structured version of the view).

I come next to the case of experiences of pain and pleasure. The *International Association for the Study of Pain* defines pain as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage” (in the journal, *Pain*, 1986). The view that pain has distinct sensory and affective/emotional components, subserved by different neural mechanisms, was first proposed by Melzack and Casey in 1968, and in the thirty or so years since then it has been

shown to be well motivated by both a wealth of clinical data and neuroscientific evidence.<sup>7</sup>

Normally, in a pain experience, both components are present. But in some cases, the affective component is missing. For example, people who undergo prefrontal leukotomies (operations that sever the neural connections in the deep white matter in the frontal lobes) as a last resort for their intractable, constant, severe pain are typically cheerful and relaxed afterwards. They report still having pains, but they no longer *mind* them.

Similar reports come from people suffering pain who are under hypnotic suggestion or nitrous oxide. Such cases of “reactive disassociation”, as Dennett (1978) calls them, are ones in which the distinctive sensory dimension of pain is present but the aversive component is gone. Is pain itself still present? It seems so. The patients *say* that they continue to feel pain. I see no reason not to take these reports at face value. What they show, I suggest, is that pain is not *essentially* an aversive experience.

In any event, a *typical* pain experience has both a sensory and an affective dimension. Consider first the sensory side of pain. I have argued elsewhere (Tye 2003; Tye forthcoming) that pains are experiences that represent tissue damage in bodily parts. Phantom limb pains are experiences whose subjects hallucinate the relevant bodily parts. The case of phantom limb pain is thus one of experiential misrepresentation. Similarly, with referred pain. One can feel a pain in the left arm, when there is nothing wrong with the arm, the cause of the experience being a disturbance in the heart. Such a pain intuitively is inaccurate or misleading; for without additional information, on the basis of the pain, one would be disposed to nurse the arm, to rub it, to believe that something is awry in the arm itself. The obvious explanation again is that there is experiential misrepresentation. Here the bodily part exists, but the case is one in which the subject is under an illusion. Her experience represents (in part) that there is tissue damage at a certain bodily location, when in reality the damage is elsewhere in the body.

Consider next the affective dimension of pain. Pain is normally very unpleasant. People in pain try to get rid of it or to diminish it. Why? The answer surely is because pain *feels* unpleasant or bad, because it is *experienced* as such. Badness, then, or aptness to harm is part of the representational content of pain. Pain experiences represent tissue damage and further represent such damage as bad for their subjects. But this surely does not require all those who experience pain to have the concept BAD or APT TO HARM). Intuitively, we do not need to be able to think thoughts in order for pains to feel bad to us. The most plausible view is that we are hard-wired

---

<sup>7</sup> For useful summaries here, see Melzack and Wall 1983, Price 1999.

by nature to experience pain as bad. Pain experiences, then, have nonconceptual contents.

For another example, consider orgasm. Orgasm is a bodily sensation, but it is not only that. The most natural description of an orgasm, and indeed of any pleasant experience is “it feels good.” One’s orgasm represents a certain change in the region of the genitals as good for one, as something apt to benefit, not to harm one.<sup>8</sup> Intuitively, that isn’t a conceptual response. One cannot help but feel the relevant bodily disturbance except as good.

These reflections naturally lead to a general proposal that nature wired into us (and many other creatures) value-tracking detectors B detectors that enable us to track value in a primitive way and thereby to behave in a fashion most conducive to our survival. This proposal is one that the psychologist, J.J. Gibson, would have endorsed. In Gibson’s view, we directly perceive affordances, and affordances are values. For example, according to Gibson, the tree looks good to climb to the squirrel whereas it looks good to perch on for the bird. The squirrel and the bird are directly aware of different affordances.

I come next to some inference patterns that seem to me to support the nonconceptualist thesis (and in this instance my version of it in particular). Suppose

I feel a pain in a leg

is true. It does not follow that

There is a leg in which I feel a pain

is true. For the case could be one of phantom limb pain. Suppose now

I feel a pain in my right thigh

and

My right thigh is the body part of mine that was bitten by a snake

are both true. From these two claims, we *may* infer that

I feel a pain in the body part of mine that was bitten by a snake

is true.

Why is it that the first inference is invalid but the second valid? Why is exportation unsafe with respect to “a leg” in the first inference but substitution of co-referential terms safe in the second inference? The answer, I suggest, is that pain experiences represent but not in the manner of thoughts or beliefs. Pain experiences are representations – hence they can represent a leg

---

<sup>8</sup> The suggestion that the pleasuringness of orgasms is part of their representational content is made in Tye 1995a. It is also the view taken by William Seager (forthcoming).

when there is no leg – but they have a coarse-grained nonconceptual content. So, substitution of co-referential terms for bodily parts is permissible.

Another motivation for the nonconceptualist thesis is provided by the phenomenon of concept acquisition. Human beings acquire many general concepts via perceptual experience. How is this possible? If the word pre-conceptually really were a “blooming, buzzing confusion”, as William James supposed, then it is utterly mysterious how we could acquire color and shape concepts from our experience. By contrast, if the world is already presented to us, at a nonconceptual level, as being made up of three-dimensional surfaces of varying colors and shapes, it is easy to how we can come to conceptualize the world via color and shape concepts.

All but one of the above motivations are intended to motivate the *general* nonconceptualist thesis rather than my coarse-grained version of it. However, to the extent that the questions I posed earlier for the alternative versions of that thesis have no satisfactory answers, the above considerations all count in favor of my proposal. There is one further point worth making here. Simplicity favors my version of the nonconceptualist view. Given that there are conceptual states with conceptual contents, for example, thoughts, and further that, at a subpersonal level, there are nonconceptual states with coarse-grained nonconceptual contents (for example, states in the visual system that represent changes of light intensity or zero-crossings), why introduce a further category of states that are nonconceptual but that have conceptual or fine-grained nonconceptual contents? There is no need to complicate things in this way.

I return in the next section to the issue of fineness of grain in color shade experiences. As I mentioned earlier, fineness of grain historically was an extremely important motivation for the nonconceptualist view (Evans 1982). Let us consider next whether it really is the case that our visual experiences represent the world with a determinacy of detail that is not capturable conceptually in the experiences.

#### **4 Conceptualist Accounts of Fineness of Grain**

Some philosophers claim that the determinacy of detail in visual experience *can* be captured by concepts at play in the experiences. What is needed, according to the first conceptualist view I shall consider, is simply the acknowledgment, in the case of color experience, that some of our color concepts pick out minimal shades of color. This is one view adopted by

McDowell in *Mind and World*.<sup>9</sup> He comments: “What is in play here is a recognitional capacity, possibly quite short-lived...” (p. 57). McDowell’s thought, elucidated more clearly in a subsequent symposium on *Mind and World*<sup>10</sup>, is that there is a recognitional capacity that persists for a little while *after* an experience of the shade recognized and thus a recognitional concept is exercised. More specifically, according to McDowell, the conceptual content

This is colored (with) S

is in the content of the experience, where S is a general recognitional concept of a fine-sliced shade.

This is not convincing. Human memory is limited. We abstract away from details to avoid information overload. We have recognitional concepts such as RED, GREEN, BLUE, and more specific ones such as SCARLET, and BRIGHT SCARLET. But we do not have recognitional concepts for minimal shades. The recognitional capacities to which McDowell adverts simply do not exist. The ordinary person cannot recognize red<sub>27</sub>, even after having just seen it. People who are shown a patch of color and then very shortly afterwards are asked whether a second patch has the same shade of color or a minimally different one do not do well at the task.<sup>11</sup> Of course, if the original patch is re-presented *before* the original experience is over — and that will not be until roughly 1/3 of a second or so after the original patches are removed, given Sperling’s data — then the match will be made successfully. But this does not show a recognitional capacity. For that requires the capacity to recognize the given hue when it comes again *after* the initial experience ends.<sup>12</sup>

A second reply the conceptualist might make to the alleged fineness of grain in visual experience is to allow that the subject of an experience of a minimal shade lacks a general recognitional concept of that shade, but to insist that it does not follow that the experience has a nonconceptual content, since the subject can conceptualize the given shade in the experience via a general, fine-grained perceptual concept that the subject is hard-wired to exercise in the given situation.

Such a “concept” is one that never enters memory. The subject possesses the concept, on one natural way of understanding the above proposal,

---

<sup>9</sup> I say one view here, since there seem to be two different views on offer in *Mind and World*, the second of which will occupy us shortly.

<sup>10</sup> In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> See here Hurvich 1981; Halsey and Chapanis 1951. Also Raffman 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Another objection is that there cannot be recognition for a *first-time* experience of a property; but that experience still has a specific representational content: the world still appears a certain way to the subject of the experience (Peacocke, 2000).



by having a hard-wired disposition to exercise the concept in certain circumstances. This, however, seems very implausible. In general, the disposition to exercise a concept in certain circumstances does not confer the ability to exercise the concept in one's thoughts. For example, Frank Jackson's Mary, while in her black and white room, does not possess *phenomenal* concepts of a sort the rest of us exercise in our introspective awareness of experiences of the various hues, since she does not know what it is like to experience the hues. And not knowing this, she does not have any understanding of the relevant phenomenal concepts. So, she is not capable of thinking thoughts into which such phenomenal concepts enter. But Mary in her room *does* have the disposition to exercise those concepts in classifications she makes of how objects appear to her if and when she sees objects with the various hues.

One way to try to handle this difficulty is to insist that the relevant, general, fine-grained concepts are possessed only at the times of their exercise. They are automatically manufactured on the spot, as the subject undergoes the experiences; the concepts are then lost as soon as the experiences are over. The obvious trouble with this view is that if such concepts occur in the subject's experiences then they must be concepts the subject possesses and hence concepts that the subject is capable of exercising in thought. But if these concepts can occur in the subject's thoughts as well as in her experiences, and they really are general concepts, then the subject should be able to think thoughts that use the concepts even when the experiences are not present; and this conflicts with the hypothesis that the relevant concepts are lost once the experiences end.

Here is another problem. Suppose that I am viewing a colored patch and that my visual experience conceptually represents this patch as  $\text{red}_{25}$ . Suppose further that my experience is not fleeting: I am staring at the patch for a considerable length of time. While my experience lasts, can I think to myself a thought which exercises this concept, for example, the thought that I am seeing something with shade  $\text{red}_{25}$ ? It seems to me that the only thoughts I can form at such a time about  $\text{red}_{25}$  have a demonstrative content. I can mentally "point" at the shade I am experiencing. I can think of it as that shade or that shade of red or perhaps just that. But, if my thoughts here *seem* to me to have a demonstrative content, then, given that I have privileged access to the contents of my thoughts (that I can know via introspection alone what I am thinking<sup>13</sup>), they do have such content. It seems, then, that I cannot think the thought that I am seeing  $\text{red}_{25}$ , from which it follows

---

<sup>13</sup> Assuming my faculty of introspection is working properly. For more on privileged access, see McLaughlin and Tye 1998.

that I do not possess the general concept  $\text{red}_{25}$ . And if I do not possess this concept, then I cannot exercise it in *my* visual experience.

This brings me to the third reply that the conceptualist might make, namely to suggest that the concept for a shade employed by visual experience is indeed demonstrative. The obvious immediate question for this reply is: what form does the demonstrative concept in the experience take? McDowell, also in *Mind and World*, appeals to the demonstrative THAT SHADE. To experience a particular shade,  $\text{red}_{27}$ , say, is to have an experience of something as being of that shade, where the latter is to be understood as involving the application of the concept THAT SHADE to  $\text{red}_{27}$ . On this view, seeing a shade is the same as or at least to be modeled on seeing something *as* having that shade.

The difference, then, between seeing  $\text{red}_{27}$  and  $\text{red}_{28}$  is the difference between applying the concept THAT SHADE to  $\text{red}_{27}$  and applying it to  $\text{red}_{28}$ . The concept that shade, in the context of the one experience, refers to  $\text{red}_{27}$ ; the concept that shade, in the context of the other experience, refers to  $\text{red}_{28}$ . The two experiences thereby have different correctness conditions and thus different contents.

This is problematic, as has been noted by several philosophers (but most forcefully by Peacocke 1998, 2000). First, which concept exactly is exercised in the experience of a particular shade of red? The concept McDowell appeals to is the concept THAT SHADE. But why not THAT SHADE OF RED? Or THAT COLOR? Or THAT RED? There seems no non-arbitrary way of deciding between these candidates C they all seem equally eligible C and thus no fact of the matter as to which one is applied in the experience. It appears, then, that the problem of differences of grain between conceptual resources and experience of shades is genuine but opposite to that envisaged by Evans. For now we have too many available concepts for each shade rather than too many shade experiences for each available concept.

Secondly, McDowell's proposal appeals to a demonstrative concept that uses a general sortal, SHADE. The latter is a recognitional concept. The idea that in order to undergo an experience of a particular shade of red, something a very small child can do, from a very early age, one must possess the concept SHADE, is absurd. To possess the concept SHADE, one must possess a cognitive grasp of the difference between a shade and a color that is not a shade, classifying  $\text{red}_{27}$  as a shade, for example, and red as not. It seems to me quite likely that some high schoolers do not grasp the concept SHADE!

One way to handle these problems is to appeal to a pure demonstrative THAT. In connection with this possibility, Peacocke (2000, p. 246) comments:

Someone could be introduced to the general concept timbre, applicable to sounds, by his first having an experience leading him to judge, "That's beautiful", referring specifically to the timbre of, say, a clarinet. It may be that our listener only later applies the concept timbre to the instance he had already perceived and thought about. ("That sound" could be too unspecific to capture what he experienced as beautiful.)

But what is the referent of the demonstrative in the color case? The obvious answer is: the particular shade. *Which* shade? Suppose I am viewing a color patch with the shade, red<sub>18</sub>. Pointing at the patch and the shade, on the basis of my experience, I say, "That has that shade". Should we suppose that the concept THAT, exercised in the experience with respect to a shade, refers via a sample of the shade, namely the shade of the patch the subject is viewing? Then, on the sample view, both my remark and my experience are accurate. However, if I am *misperceiving* the patch and experiencing it as having a shade different from the one it actually has, then my experience will not represent the patch as having *that*, understood as the actual shade of the patch, at all. So, the content of my experience cannot be demonstrative.

The conceptualist might respond that, whatever may be the case for the demonstrative *expression*, "that shade", the demonstrative concept exercised in the experience is a concept of the shade the given surface *appears* to have. But now in the case of misperception, there is no sample of the color in the world. So, how is the referent of the concept fixed? The obvious reply is that it is fixed by the content of the subject's experience: the concept refers to the shade the given experience represents the surface as having. However, this reply is not available to the conceptualist about the content of visual experience; for the content of the demonstrative concept is supposed to be *part* of the content of the experience and so the concept cannot have its referent fixed by that content (Heck 2000, p. 496).<sup>14</sup>

There is a further problem. Consider the case of shape. Suppose you and I are both viewing the same shape. The concept THAT, in this case, refers to the shape. But suppose you experience it as a square and I experience as a regular diamond so that there is a difference in how things appear, in the contents of our experiences. That difference hasn't been captured by appeal to the demonstrative here.

The conclusion to which we are drawn is that conceptualism cannot account for determinacy of detail in color (and shape) experiences. These expe-

---

<sup>14</sup> One nonconceptualist, Chris Peacocke, does not notice this problem. As a result, in a recent essay (1998), he comments: "Since these unsupplemented perceptual-demonstratives exist, and can pick out fine-grained properties, the anti-conceptualist should not try to rest his case on fineness of grain" (p. 610). This concession seems to me too hasty.

riences represent the world with a determinacy of detail that goes beyond any concepts available for use in the experiences. In this way, color (and shape) experiences are fine-grained.

On my version of nonconceptualism, this is accounted for by supposing that color (and shape) experiences have robustly nonconceptual contents. Thus, on the structured version of this view, determinate shades of color (and shapes) enter into these contents. The contents themselves have coarse-grained individuation conditions in the sense explained earlier. Coarseness of grain of this sort is clearly compatible with fineness of grain in color shades (or shapes) represented.

## 5 Squares and Diamonds

Peacocke (2000) says:

We will not do justice to the ... phenomenology of experience if we restrict ourselves to those contents which can be built up by referring to the properties and relations which the perceived objects are represented by the experiences as possessing. We must, in describing the fine-grained phenomenology, make use of the notion of the *way* in which some property or relation is given in the experience. (p. 240)

He continues:

The same shape can be perceived in two different ways, and the same holds for shape properties, if we regard them as within the representational content of experience. Mach's example of one and the same shape that can be perceived either as a square or as a regular diamond is a familiar example..... An object can be perceived either as a square, or as a diamond, in either of the standard orientations relative to the perceiver. (p. 241)

In these passages, Peacocke is trying to make a case for adopting a view of nonconceptual content for experience that is itself fine-grained. According to Peacocke, we need to introduce ways properties are presented in experience in order to account fully for the phenomenology. In this concluding section, I want to consider the case of squares and diamonds in detail and along with it Peacocke's argument for a fine-grained approach to nonconceptual content.

First, does it really make clear sense to talk of the way a shape is presented in experience or the way a color is presented (as Peacocke does)? We may happily allow, of course, that if something looks red, say, it looks a certain way, namely red. But the way here is the way the *thing* looks. Redness, the property, is not experienced as being given in a certain way (other

than as belonging to the thing).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, I would say, for the case of shape. The shape, squareness, viewed as a universal, is not presented in experience in any particular way. Individual squares are so presented.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, each such square *X* each particular *X* is, in one sense, a colored shape. But it is only relative to this use of “shape” that it is uncontroversial that shapes can be presented in different ways in experience. Thus, viewing a figure, I can experience its shape as a regular diamond, say, as Peacocke asserts, and not as a square only insofar as *the figure* is presented to me in experience as regular diamond-shaped (and not as square). The figure, in looking regular diamond-shaped, to me looks a certain way. This way is not a way a shape property looks.

Let us leave this point and look more closely at the square/diamond example. Peacocke holds that the fine-grained view of nonconceptual content is necessitated by a proper account of this and other such examples.<sup>17</sup> But why?

---

<sup>15</sup> It might be held that where there is an inverted spectrum, red is given in experience something other than the normal way. However, I deny this. To one who has an inverted spectrum, red things do not appear red. They appear green. So, red itself is not given in experience to the invert in any way. Red things are so given. They are given as green. Of course, this commits me to holding that color inversions are a form of misperception, but this seems to me the correct view (both for the standard inverted spectrum case and for the more *recherche* versions). For more here, see my 2000, chapters 4 and 5. There is another possible account of color inversions worth mentioning, namely that red things are experienced as red by the invert, but they are also experienced as having another surface quality which makes the redness of those things manifest, and this quality is different from the one that makes redness manifest for normals. On this view, there is no misperception with respect to the color of red things. But equally, there is no need to countenance ways, considered as entities distinct from properties and relations; for the qualities now grounding color inversions are qualities of things.

<sup>16</sup> In general, in my view, it is a mistake to model our awareness of qualities on our awareness of particulars. When we see particulars, they look various ways to us but the qualities of which we are conscious in seeing these particulars do not look any way. Our awareness of the relevant qualities is direct. It involves *no* mode of presentation. To suppose otherwise is to take the first step down the slippery path that leads to the thesis of revelation with respect to the qualities we experience (the thesis that the nature of such qualities is fully revealed to us in experience). And the thesis of revelation is a philosophical thesis (not a thesis of commonsense) and one that (by my lights) generates a world view that is clearly unacceptable.

<sup>17</sup> Again, I want to stress that the above discussion of demonstratives does *not* undercut the view that the fineness of grain in visual experience can be represented conceptually in *demonstrative judgments or thoughts* made on the basis of experience. What I have argued is that *the visual experiences themselves* do not represent details *via* demonstrative concepts.

The reasoning seems to be as follows. The property of being a square is the same as the property of being a regular diamond.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the robustly nonconceptual content that X is square is the same as the robustly nonconceptual content that X is a regular diamond. However, there is a difference between how X looks, when X looks square, and how X looks, when X looks regular diamond-shaped (or vice-versa). This phenomenological difference, Peacocke believes, is one that cannot be accounted for by appeal to robustly nonconceptual content.

To see what is wrong with this argument, consider the following parallel argument. The way something looks, when it looks square is different from the way it looks, when it feels square by touch. The same property — squareness — is represented in both cases. So, the robustly nonconceptual content of the experience of X's looking square is the same as the robustly nonconceptual content of the experience of X's feeling square by touch. So, the phenomenological difference between the way X looks and the way X feels by touch cannot be captured solely via appeal to robustly nonconceptual content.

The standard way of responding to the second argument is to note that when something looks square, many other properties are represented in addition to squareness — properties not represented when something feels square by touch. For example, the color of the object is represented, its distance away, its two-dimensional location relative to the eyes. In the haptic case, the shape is represented as belonging to a surface with which one is in one bodily contact; the temperature of the surface is represented; there is a more detailed representation of the degree of solidity.

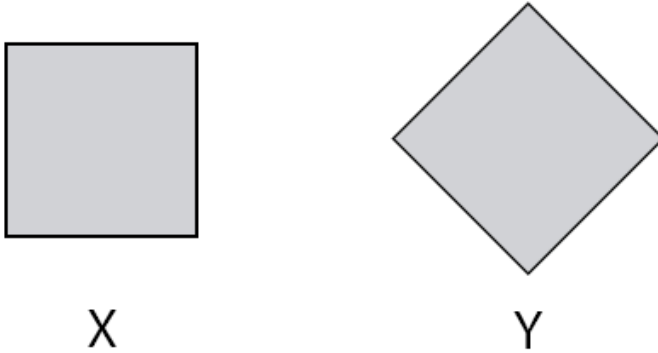
In similar fashion, I maintain that when something looks square, certain properties are represented that are not represented when the same thing looks regular diamond-shaped (or vice-versa). This can be brought out as follows.

Consider first the case below of two different figures, one of which looks square and the other of which looks regular diamond-shaped:

---

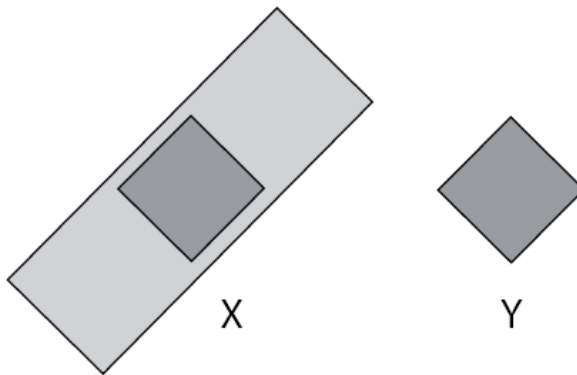
<sup>18</sup> This claim is very plausible and I shall not challenge it in what follows. (I have contested it elsewhere (Tye 2003, pp. 173-4), but I now prefer the response below.)

**Example 1**



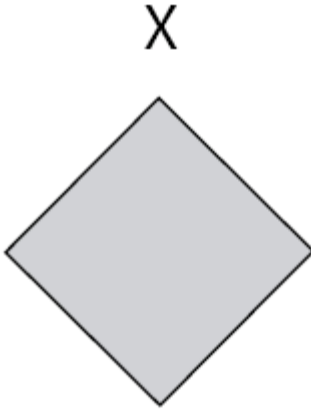
Here it is obvious that there is a difference in the (viewer-relative) properties represented in the two cases. For example, X looks to be resting on a side; Y does not. Y looks to be standing or balanced on a point; X does not. X looks to have two vertical sides; Y does not. X looks to have two horizontal sides; Y does not. Y looks to have inclined sides; X does not.

**Example 2**



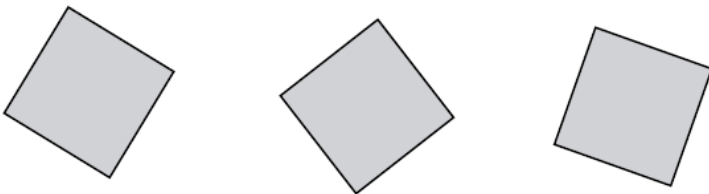
In this example, the square, X, inside the rectangle on the left, can look square. When it does so, it looks different from the figure, Y, on the right. Here again, there is a difference in (viewer-relative) properties represented. When X looks square, X looks to have an inclined base; Y does not. In such circumstances, X looks tilted; Y does not. Y looks upright; X does not.

**Example 3**



In this example, we have single figure, X, that can look either square or regular diamond-shaped. If X looks square, X looks to have an inclined base. X then looks tilted. If X looks diamond-shaped, X looks upright. So, when X looks square, X is represented as having the property of being tilted; this property is not represented as belonging to X when X looks diamond-shaped.

Note that when something looks tilted, it can look tilted at a variety of orientations (see below); but in each such case, the figure is represented as having the property of being tilted.





Chris Peacocke has objected to this proposal on two grounds (in a recent commentary). First, figures such as X in example 3 above can sometimes look square without looking tilted, as when one sees an appropriate pattern of floor tiles. Secondly, the appeal to tilt as a ground of the phenomenal difference between looking square and looking regular diamond-shaped ignores the role symmetry is agreed to play by psychologists in such experiences.

Consider the second point first. For a symmetrical figure such as a square, tilt goes with a certain sort of symmetry, namely symmetry about an axis bisecting two opposite sides. If the figure, X, looks tilted 45 degrees to the right (left), it looks symmetrical about an axis inclined 45 degrees to the right (left) and bisecting two of its sides. If X looks upright, as it does if it looks regular diamond-shaped, it looks symmetrical about a vertical axis of symmetry, one that bisects two opposite angles. In looking tilted, X does not thereby look upright, of course, since the visual experience in this case tracks the first symmetry and not the second. Of course, X actually has both symmetries, but the property of being symmetrical about an axis bisecting opposite sides is not necessarily co-instantiated with the property of being symmetrical about an axis bisecting opposite angles. In the case of a vase figure, for example, the figure is symmetrical about an axis that bisects the top and bottom sides of the vase but it is not symmetrical about an axis that bisects two opposite angles.

In the case of the pattern of floor tiles, it seems to me that their looking square, say, at least requires that they look to have a certain symmetry, as Peacocke himself would grant, and the relevant symmetry, I claim, for each tile, is about an axis that bisects two opposite sides and that has a direction (relative to the perceiver) which intuitively is represented in the experience. But if this is so, then (on the nonconceptualist view), contra Peacocke, each tile will automatically look tilted in a certain direction relative the perceiver.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> It is also worth stressing that the coarse-grained account I am proposing of the nonconceptual content of experience can account for the rational transition from something's looking square to the judgement that it is square as opposed to the judgement that it is regular diamond-shaped (given the right circumstances), since the thing in question will then look to have certain properties it will not look to have in the case it looks regular diamond-shaped. The nonconceptual representation of these properties in the former experience justifies the transition (via a reliable process) to the judgement that a square is present rather than to the judgement concerning a diamond shape.

The conclusion I draw is that the familiar example of squares and diamonds provides no good reason to move away from the view that the non-conceptual content of visual experience is robust.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Alex Byrne has suggested to me that although the case of squares and diamonds can be handled in the way I propose, there is another similar case which creates difficulty, namely that in which I experience nine dots first as making up three rows of three and second as making up three columns of three. Here there is a clear phenomenal difference in how the dots look but not one, according to Byrne, that can be handled in terms of a difference in robust nonconceptual content, since the property of making up three rows of three dots is necessarily co-instantiated with the property of making up three columns of three dots. (Of course, this presents a problem for the view that experiences have structured, robustly non-conceptual contents only on the assumption that necessarily co-instantiated properties are identical.)

My reply unsurprisingly is that there are other represented properties in terms of which the difference in content can be drawn. For example, when the dot pattern looks made up of three rows of three dots, it looks divided into three rows. It does not look this way when it looks made up of three columns of three dots. Then it looks divided into three columns. Patently, the property of dividing into three rows is not identical with the property of dividing into three columns (some dot patterns with three rows divide into four columns). Further, in the dot pattern of three rows of three, the bottom three dots appear to compose a row (as do the three dots immediately above them and the three dots immediately above those dots). They do not appear this way when the dot pattern looks made up of columns. Since the property of composing a row is possessed by dots elsewhere that are laid out in a row without there being any columns, it is not the case that the property of composing a row can be redescribed in column terms such that the property, so described, is represented when the dot pattern of nine is experienced as dividing into three columns.

There is a further case mentioned by David Chalmers (forthcoming) which also deserves a quick response. Chalmers asks us to imagine an “El Greco” world in which everything is stretched ten times in one direction but in which structure and dynamics are otherwise the same. In this world, Chalmers says, long thin rectangles look phenomenally square even though the visual experiences they generate, being normally caused by long, thin rectangles, represent them as having a certain sort of rectangularity. This supposedly creates difficulty for any coarse-grained view of the content of experience. There is no real difficulty, however.

Ask someone in the El Greco world to trace out in space the shape of something that looks square to her. What will this person draw? A long, thin rectangle? I think not: kinaesthetic feedback will tell her that cannot be right. A square? Again, I think not: that will not *look* right. Ask this person to feel out the shape of an object that looks square to her. How will it feel? Will all the sides feel to be the same length? Surely not. In general, touch corrects vision. The stick that looks bent in water no longer looks bent once its shape is felt by hand. So, it is unlikely that the thin rectangle will continue to look square. Why? Obvious answer: because the case is one of shape illusion (or normal misperception and in this respect is like the Muller-Lyer). Accordingly, long, thin rectangles are *not* represented in visual experience in the El Greco world as thin rectangles. They are represented as square.

## References

- Byrne, A. 2005. Perception and Conceptual Content. *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. E. Sosa and M. Steup, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chalmers, D. 2005. Perception and the Fall from Eden. *Perceptual Experience*, ed. T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 49-125.
- Damasio, A. 1994. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Damasio, A. 1999. *The Feeling of what Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co.
- Davis, M. 1992. The Role of the Amygdala in Conditioned Fear. *The Amygdala: Neurobiological Aspects of Emotion, Memory, and Mental Dysfunction*, ed. J. P. Aggleton, New York: Wiley-Liss.
- Dennett, D. 1978. Why You Can't Make a Computer that Feels Pain. *Brainstorms*, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.
- Evans, G. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halsey, R. and Chapanis, A. 1951. Number of Absolutely Identifiable Hues. *Journal of the Optical Society of America*, 41, 1057-1058.
- Hayhoe, M., Bensinger, D., and Ballard, D. 1998. Task Constraints in Visual Working Memory, *Vision Research*, 38, 125-137.
- Heck, R. 2000. Nonconceptual Content and the "Space of Reasons". *Philosophical Review*, 109: 483-523.
- Hurvich, L. 1981. *Color Vision*. Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates.
- LeDoux, J. 1992. Emotion and the Amygdala. *The Amygdala: Neurobiological Aspects of Emotion, Memory, and Mental Dysfunction*, ed. J. P. Aggleton, New York: Wiley-Liss.
- LeDoux, J. 1996. *The Emotional Brain*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- McDowell, J. 1994. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, J. 1998. Response to Peacocke. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 414-419.
- McLaughlin, B. and Tye, M. 1998. Is Content-Externalism compatible with Privileged Access? *Philosophical Review*, 107: 349-380.
- Melzack, R. and Casey, K. 1968. Sensory, Motivational, and Central Control Determinants of Pain: A New Conceptual Model. *The Skin Senses*, ed. D. Keshalo, Springfield, Illinois.
- Melzack, R. and Wall, P. 1983. *The Challenge of Pain*. New York: Basic Books.
- Peacocke, C. 1992. Scenarios, Concepts, and Perception. *The Contents of Experience : Essays on Perception*, ed. T. Crane, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 105-135.

- Peacocke, C. 1998. Nonconceptual Content Defended. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 58, 381-388.
- Peacocke, C. 2002. Does Perception have a Nonconceptual Content? *Journal of Philosophy*, 98, 239-264.
- Price, D. 1999. Psychological Mechanisms of Pain and Analgesia. *Progress in Pain Research and Management*, Vol. 15, Seattle: IASP Press.
- Raffmann, D. 1996. On the Persistence of Phenomenology. *Conscious Experience*, ed. T. Metzinger, Schoningh-Verlag Press.
- Seager, W. 2002. Emotional Introspection. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 11(4): 666-687
- Tye, M. 1995. *Ten Problems of Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, Bradford Books.
- Tye, M. 1995a. Blindsight, Orgasm, and Representational Overlap. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 18: 268-269.
- Tye, M. 2000. *Consciousness, Color, and Content*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.
- Tye, M. 2003. *Consciousness and Persons: Unity and Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.
- Tye, M. 2006 Another Look at Representationalism and Pain. *Pain: New Essays on Its Nature and the Methodology of Its Study*, ed. M. Aydede Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

*Michael Tye*  
*The University of Texas at Austin*  
*Department of Philosophy*  
*Austin, Texas 78750 – United States*  
[mtye@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:mtye@mail.utexas.edu)

---

# Nonconceptual Epicycles<sup>1</sup>

SONIA SEDIVY

## 1 Introduction

Is some perceptual content nonconceptual — in the sense that a person need not possess “matching concepts” for “the general features entering into those contents”? (Tye, 1995, p. 139) This certainly looks like a question. But what it asks is not genuinely in question *if* we keep in place the background commitments that make positing nonconceptual content not only sensible but also inevitable. This question — Is some perceptual content nonconceptual, *provided* we keep in place the commitments that make positing such content sensible and needed? — quite evidently needs no discussion since its answer can only be yes. The question can be refocused slightly while delivering an equally inevitable verdict. Is all perceptual content conceptual (so that there is no nonconceptual content), *provided* we keep in place the background commitments that make positing nonconceptual content sensible and inevitable? Like its equivalent, this question can only have one answer — in this case, no — needing no discussion either.

Why make such an apparently obvious point? Because the trend is to zero-in on the details of various competing proposals without addressing the background commitments that will make those details seem sensible or just

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my editor, Christine van Geen for her most helpful comments and suggestions. As always, I would also like to thank William Seager for his insightful criticisms and wonderful conversation. This paper has a companion, or better yet, sister paper with which, like a Siamese twin, it is joined at the hip. The two papers present a package, joined in what I present here briefly in Part I, and developed in detail in “Perceptual Engagement with the World, starting afresh with disjunctivism.”

the opposite. This trend seems to prevail among a heterogeneous variety of proposals in favor of factoring perceptual experience into conceptual and nonconceptual contents. Rather than focusing on the details of competing proposals for and against nonconceptual contents, we need to pause to examine the commitments on both sides. Why not explore alternatives to the predominant status quo, alternatives that urge thorough transformations in our understanding of ourselves, transformations that displace certain seemingly inevitable issues and solutions?

Here is a question that we might ask in place of the earlier apparent questions, once we change our focus from details to background commitments.

Would there be any reason to posit nonconceptual content if the world that persons experience is not a brute presence but a range of thinkables, so that it is a genuine possibility that the world and our experiences, and the world and our thoughts interpenetrate?

In such a transformation of our understanding of ‘our place in the physical universe’ – as we tend to say when we acculturate undergraduates to the issues in contemporary theory of mind – the need to posit nonconceptual content does not arise because perceptual content can be explained without controversy as just what it seems to be: experiential content that engages or involves individuals and their determinate properties in the world. As things stand today, a range of revisionary work spanning across metaphysics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind and theory of knowledge is needed to make this sort of view available: that the richness and fine grain of perceptual content is the richness and fine grain of determinate properties in the world under perceptual modes of presentation. That is why the issue is nothing less than constitutive. Should we change our philosophical understanding of ourselves in transformative ways – transformations that imply that personal content is and can only be thoroughly conceptual?

I will be arguing that the answer to this question is ‘yes.’ (i) Perceptual content involves individuals in their perceptible determinate properties. (ii) Perceptual content involves determinate properties in a way that relies on our conceptual capacities no less than on the properties. Experience that involves determinate properties is not pre- or non-conceptual.

This is the conceptualist proposal. I divide the proposal into two principal components to indicate points of divergence with theorists who propose that the rich, fine grain of our perceptual experiences is a nonconceptual content. The first key point of divergence is whether the fine grain of perceptual experience is to be understood internally or contextually. Some but not all proposals for nonconceptual contents are internalist, casting nonconceptual contents as determined by (or supervenient on) facts about the indi-

vidual perceiver. However, some nonconceptualists and conceptualists share the belief that the qualitative character of perceptual experience needs an externalist explanation that includes broader contextual factors. Yet this shared understanding immediately divides over the question whether our conceptual capacities are an integral element in our perceptual capacity to engage with properties in the world.

Perhaps it is too strong to suggest that what is at issue is a paradigm shift as my title suggests. What seems undeniable is that there is ‘business as usual’ in theory of mind – recognizably normal ways of posing issues and setting about addressing them – with fringes of suggestions that do not quite mesh here and there. One such recalcitrant nub coalesces around the view that all personal content is conceptual since this implication seems to disturb ‘business as usual’ into a defensive posture, defensive in the well-understood sense that ‘the best defense is offense.’ But at least the suggestion of something approaching a paradigm shift might be provocative enough to re-channel the debate somewhat. To place the issues genuinely under scrutiny, debate needs to address the commitments that hold the need for something like nonconceptual content in place and alternative commitments that displace that need.

At least this is my view. I cannot speak for McDowell and Brewer – the culprits usually identified as making various mistakes in their arguments for the thoroughly conceptual nature of human mentality. In this article, I speak only for myself, leaving it to readers to wonder whether McDowell and Brewer would agree with my suggestions, if readers might be so inclined. My task is how to make us genuinely confront our commitments rather than only the details of competing proposals – all in the space of an article. This is the challenge that this article faces.

Yet the stakes are even higher. To explain, I should acknowledge having already made some attempts at coaxing the debate away from a normal focus on details to discussion of constitutive commitments. But it seems those attempts were not recognizable as discussions of nonconceptual contents for the most part. To show what does not seem to work, let me mention how those attempts went. One article explicitly tried to shift attention from the details of current proposals to background commitments by counterpoising Sellars’ and Wittgenstein’s ideas about perception.<sup>2</sup> The idea was to confront some of Wittgenstein’s ‘outside of any paradigm’ investigations of perception with Sellars’ work. Sellars is the foil because it was his influential work in the 1950’s that set-up ‘business as usual’ for the remainder of

---

<sup>2</sup> Sedivy, (2004a) “Wittgenstein’s Diagnosis of Empiricism’s Third Dogma: Why perception is not an amalgam of sensation and conceptualization.”

the twentieth century, and now apparently, for the twenty-first as well. That is, after a crystalline and virtuoso demolition of the “framework of givenness,” Sellars opts for the conservative option of rehabilitating sensory impressions as purely causal ingredients of experience by cleansing away any epistemic role. I, at least, find this trajectory stunning – powerful, poignant, for better and for worse.

In another attempt, I argued for thinking about personal contents – or simply, the mind – as contents that lack vehicles.<sup>3</sup> Part of the point of that alternative way of thinking about ourselves is that it is part and parcel of showing that personal contents are conceptual that there is nothing like nonconceptual content at the ‘personal level’ – since that is one form of a content/vehicle confusion.

The discussion, needless to say, remains one about the details of proposals (a list of ever-growing references is surely not needed to prove this point). One might just note how John McDowell's proposal that all content is conceptual is treated within debates over nonconceptual content. Such debates proceed swiftly to the details of McDowell's proposal about demonstrative concepts – perhaps with a nod to McDowell's exclusively ‘epistemic’ motivation – without considering what is surely something of a sea change in our understanding of persons and world.<sup>4</sup>

So the full challenge for this article is: how might one address the issues so they connect *recognizably* with more normal debates over nonconceptual content and so they *rechannel* those debates towards underlying issues?

For better or for worse, given the need for brevity, this paper will focus the discussion in the following three steps. The opening section sets-up the issues with a brief examination of perceptual experience from the first person viewpoint. My proposal is that perception is a mode of engagement with individuals and properties to the level of determinacy relevant for hu-

---

<sup>3</sup> Sedivy, (2004b), “Minds: Contents without Vehicles.”

<sup>4</sup> For very recent examples, see Kelly (2001) and Heck Jr. (2000). Here is Kelly's statement: “McDowell and Brewer ... are motivated by a certain kind of epistemological concern ... by the need to make sense of our capacity to have beliefs with empirical content – that is, beliefs that are grounded in, or justified by, experience. (p. 402)” Here is Heck: “... McDowell argues that perceptual experience must be within “the space of reasons,” that perception must be able to give us reasons for, that is, to justify, our beliefs about the world: And, according to him, no state that does not have conceptual content can be a reason for a belief. (p. 483)” To sum it all up, here is the sub-entry on “Conceptualist Views of Content” from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on “The Contents of Perception.” “McDowell (1994), Sedivy (1996) and Brewer (1999) ... defend [experience conceptualism and the same-content thesis] on the grounds that experiences can provide justification for beliefs only if these theses are true. Peacocke (2001a), Byrne (1996), Heck (2000) and others have objected to these ‘epistemic’ defenses of experience conceptualism...”



man (or animal) complex activity. The second section goes on to explain perceptual engagement with the world by carefully examining Gareth Evans' work in *Varieties of Reference*. Gareth Evans is usually held up as suggesting nonconceptual contents way back when in the early 1980's. Yet he also tried to suggest that the best in Frege can marry the best in Russell. The issue here is that though Evans' suggestion of nonconceptual contents is often cited, the larger project within which that proposal occurs is not. But it is the larger project that opens the more radical theoretical space that conceptualist positions occupy. Evans tried to show that we are capable of genuinely singular thought that involves individuals under modes of presentation. This is precisely what conceptualists propose: that perception is a genuinely singular representational capacity that involves individuals – *and their properties as well, of course* – under modes of presentation. Was Evans mistaken in the whole point of *Varieties of Reference* while managing to interject one sensible proposal? Making good sense of Evans' overarching project yields resources from philosophy of language with which to explain the sort of perceptual content that careful phenomenological scrutiny reveals in the first section.

If we can see our way to countenancing that perceptual content is best understood as a true marriage of Frege and Russell – not merely a marriage of convenience – the chief problem that confronts the conceptualist proposal is that perceptual experiences do not seem to satisfy the 're-identification' condition on conceptual contents. This is a problem because it is a hallmark of conceptual contents that insofar as one can identify something one can also re-identify it. The third and final section solves the problem and eliminates the principal objection to the conceptualist proposal in normal debates. My solution turns on showing that the problem cases where re-identification fails in fact point to the conceptual nature of perceptual engagement.

## 2 Perceptual Engagement with the World

Let's start by examining what perceptual experience is like from the first person viewpoint. Three principal features (or aspects) stand out. All three strike me with equal wonder though not all three receive airtime in theoretical discussions of perception. I see individual members of kinds and determinate instances of properties and what I see I cannot *retain* – let alone recall – in its determinacy as my eyes move away.

Consider walking through a fall forest ablaze with colorful leaves all around. The myriad irregular superposed shapes and colors – of leaves,

twigs, berries and branches – are present to me in their determinacy and in my understanding of them. To note this is to note the following. (i) It is always something that I see rather than a “?” that belongs to no category at my disposal (since an I-know-not-what-it-is is as richly informed by my understanding as the leaves or deer that I might see). This is the dreaded conceptualist bit. (ii) What I see, I see determinately (since even a blurry grey fog or blurry lettering is determinately blurry just as it is).<sup>5</sup> This is my proposal concerning the well agreed upon ‘richness’ of perceptual experience. But in this paper, my argument for the property-involving nature of human perception starts from a yet unnoted third aspect: (iii) determinacy is not retained as the eyes move away.

Consider my forest walk again. Often, I cannot help but stop and try to take in all that beauty, to impress it within myself so that I might remember it. What I find is that I cannot retain the determinately detailed scene within myself across the instant that I look away, only to look back again immediately. This is true of all perception; we just do not notice this fact or highlight it when we turn to theorizing about perception. You can examine whether this is true of your perception – anytime, anywhere. You will find that from moment to moment you cannot retain a preceding perceptual experience in its determinacy once you look away – let alone recall it with equal determinacy days or months later. This is true however ‘simple’ or ‘complex’ the content of the perceptual experience might be – a single leaf or blade of grass, or a forest vista.

The datum that needs explaining is that: one is not able to *retain* or *maintain* a perceptual experience with equal determinacy as one’s eyes shift away, let alone to remember or recall the experience (after some interval) with the same determinacy as the original. I am suggesting that careful scrutiny of lived experience shows that there is an important lacuna in our initial theoretical descriptions of perceptual experience and hence in the catalogue of issues that theory of perception needs to address both experimentally and philosophically. The inability to retain or maintain our perceptual experiences is important theoretically because it indicates that perceptual content is object- and property-involving rather than self-standing. That is, the best explanation of our inability to retain a perceptual experience in its determinacy is that such experience involves its objects and properties. This is my suggestion. To point to the best explanation is to point to a much needed avenue of future research. (Though there are experimental findings that already bear on this phenomenological datum. For example, one line of

---

<sup>5</sup> Please see my “Perceptual Engagement with the World” for an extended discussion of this point.

research that seems relevant concerns change blindness, our inability to notice changes in a scene to which we have had long exposure.<sup>6</sup>)

Consider that self-standing representational content -- that does *not* depend on its objects and properties causally and does *not* involve the objects and properties in the representational content -- can be maintained or recalled in the absence of the represented individuals and properties. The hallmark of such contents is that they can be entertained in the absence of the represented objects and properties and hence recalled in their absence as well. What affects our ability to entertain and recall self-standing contents in the absence of the represented individuals and properties are contingent factors of representational cost, storage and access. These are the sorts of factors that affect retrieval. But the failure to retain a perceptual experience in its original determinate detail cannot be explained as a failure to recall self-standing contents that is owing to contingent factors that affect retrieval. This is because the factors that affect retrieval -- such as the "costliness" of storing complex content and organizational problems of storing complex content in a way that allows for efficient access -- do not come into effect in the momentary interval as one's eyes shift.

Perceptual experience confronts us with two problems, only one of which might be explainable in terms of memory deficits, even the sorts of deficits that affect short term memory. To be sure, perceptual experiences cannot be recalled with matching determinacy. But I am suggesting that perceptual experience poses a hard issue that must not be conflated with questions about recall: why does the determinate detail of perceptual experience outrun our ability to retain or maintain it? Is it because there is simply too much detail to store even for a momentary interval? Or is it because the experience involves the objects and properties so that when the objects and properties are no longer involved, the determinate detail is not available either? What is the better explanation? If the determinate detail is available during the experience because the experience is awareness of a representation that is not object-involving -- then that representation cannot be too costly to maintain for another split second because precisely that cost has been feasible up to the moment the eyes turn away.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See O'Regan, J.K., Rensink, R.A., Clark, J.J. (1999); Rensink, R.A., O'Regan, J.K., Clark, J.J., (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Here is a simple illustrative way to cast this point that raises an instructive objection. If I (or rather, my sub-personal Central Nervous System or CNS processes) could make my own pictures or movies at the determinate detail of perceptual experience, and if perceptual experience really is experience of such movies, then there is no reason I couldn't hold onto and 'watch' -- or at least utilize -- a given 'frame' of such a movie a split second longer. If relevant subpersonal CNS processes make determinate movies, there should not be the differ-

The hypothesis at issue is that perception is determinate and that its determinacy is an object- and property involving kind of content. One relevant consideration is that complex action must deal with change as it occurs in real-time. The activity in the first person datum I offered – that of looking at the leaves of trees while walking along a peaceful forest trail – does not raise in any obvious way the need for dealing with change as it occurs. But any number of different examples could be raised where this need would be vivid – such as hunting a deer in that same forest, or preferably, watching birds, or skiing down its icy hillsides after the leaves have fallen – as well as examples that switch scenarios altogether such as our need to drive on multi-lane highways at 120 km/h. Yet when it comes to the functional unity – or constitutive interdependence – of perception and action, examples drawn from animal life seem more vivid. We might turn to the daily dance of the food chain among gazelles and their kin with lions and cheetahs on an African savannah. The ambient habitat for all of these animals is filled with ever so slightly moving stripes and spots – of leaves, of grass, of shadows, of light, of other animals, friend and foe alike. Everything blurs and shimmers slightly with the rising heat. All parties need to note *any* unusual movement of potentially *any* of the myriad stripes or spots, however slight, *as* it occurs – so as to burst into chase or flight. How is this best achieved?

By continuous update of representational content that does not involve the individuals and properties? Or by presenting the individuals and properties? That is, by content that depends on and involves the individuals and properties? Considering the costliness of updating a representation of such a complex natural scene – and the organizational difficulty of ensuring immediate access to just the needed portion of the ambient scene (also known as the frame problem) – suggests that the best solution to the problem, and hence the best explanation, is that animals are perceptually engaged with their habitat, engagements that involve the individuals and properties that their activities concern. The inter-dependence of perception and action indicates that the best explanation for real-time activity is that it is mutually supported by and supports object- and property-involving representations –

---

ences that we can note at every moment of our waking lives. This is my point. But someone might object that when we watch movies in movie theatres, what we see are discrete frames (or pictures) with a shuttered interval of 13 milliseconds between each frame. This seems to suggest that we do retain an image for a small time interval – 13 milliseconds. But who is the “we” in question? Movie-watching demonstrates that: (i) human subpersonal processes can maintain an image for 13 milliseconds; whereas (ii) a person does not detect intervals of 13 milliseconds. The phenomenological datum stands. As a person turns her eyes away, she can no longer retain what she just saw in anything like the determinate detail of the experience itself. Many thanks to William Seager for raising this objection.

representations that up-date ‘for free’ with the changing nature of the surroundings. Such representations change as the world changes – thanks to the world.<sup>8</sup>

I am invoking two ideas that are fraught with difficulty to explain the nature of perceptual experience at the first person perspective: that perceptual experience is *determinate* and that it is a mode of *engagement*. Explaining engagement is the work of the next section. To avert any misunderstanding from the outset, let’s close this section with a couple of points about determinacy and determinate properties. It is important to note that the concept highlights what might seem to be two different points about perception, yet is really one. First, individuals and their properties are determinate. It might be helpful to note that definite and determinate are related concepts. What are ‘out there’ in the world are determinate or definite individuals and their properties. Insofar as complex activity requires engagement with individuals and properties, then it is with determinate individuals and determinate properties that complex animals engage. But this is not the only relevant factor when we consider perception. Perceptual experience is not simply individual- and property-dependent, it is a mode of engagement – as we have already noted and as I will argue. It is not simply the determinate individuals and their properties ‘out there, in the world’ that our perceptions depend on causally, but those individuals and properties under relevant perceptual modes of presentation (to put the point using one set of well-known philosophical resources). This is to stress that perceptual engagement is a representational capacity. What we enjoy perceptually is content, albeit a distinctive individual- and property-involving content that presents individuals and properties perceptually. Perceptual content is distinguished by its qualitative richness. This is the second fact that the notion of determinacy captures. Perception’s qualitative richness is predominantly cast as a richness of information. But to say that perceptual engagement is determinate – in that it presents and involves determinate individuals and properties – is to say that the qualitative richness of our experience is in the world rather than something we have ‘received’ along an informational channel (or something that supervenes on what we have received along an informational channel, etc). When it comes to perception, the two senses of determinacy belong together. The

---

<sup>8</sup> Though I cannot expand on this point within the scope of the present paper, I hope it is clear that conceptualism is in step with the growing trend in theories of mind to explain perception as a functional unity with activity, and to explain ourselves as “embodied and embedded” – indeed, my approach adds fuel to this fire. See for example, Hurley (1998) and Haugeland (1998).

notion of determinacy relates the ‘richness’ of perceptual content and the world-involving nature of such content.

Before I go on to make this case in detail, here is a summary of what this introductory section aimed to accomplish. In the first instance, the aim was to show that what philosophers have recently been referring to as the richly detailed nature of perceptual content is just what it seems – engagement with determinate properties in the world. And there is nothing about engagement with determinate properties that suggests that such a capability is not or cannot be conceptual. To point to the broad outlines of an explanation of the way in which determinate property-involving content is conceptual, let’s turn to the work of Gareth Evans – as paradoxical as this may seem.

### **3 Gareth Evans and Fregean Singular Thought: the Letter and the Spirit**

Proposals for nonconceptual contents often cite Gareth Evans’ suggestion in *The Varieties of Reference* that perceptual experience has nonconceptual content.<sup>9</sup> Presumably, part of the point of such references is to show that even a theorist who suggests that we are capable of genuinely singular, conceptual thought of individuals did not go so far as to suggest that the richly detailed attributive aspect of our thoughts or experiences could be both genuinely singular and conceptual.

To be sure, Gareth Evans suggested that nonconceptual content figures in explanations of persons rather than their subpersonal parts (whereas positing nonconceptual content in explanations of subpersonal processes can be common ground between conceptualists and nonconceptualists). But to assess what we should do with that suggestion today, we need to consider the broader project within which that suggestion figured.

Evans’s project was and still is ground-breaking in its overarching aim: to show that genuinely singular thought has Fregean senses or modes of presentation that identify individuals in the world and not merely some denizens of our own minds, such as the sense data to which Russell felt himself compelled to retreat. What Evans was trying to show in *The Varieties of Reference* is that the best in Frege, as it were, is consonant with the best in Russell. The leading insights of Frege and Russell – that senses or modes of presentation determine the individuation of mental contents, and that there are genuinely singular contents that involve what they represent – are not at odds but can be combined to yield the understanding that there is genuinely

---

<sup>9</sup> Evans, G., 1982.

singular thought: thought that is conceptual, that is individuated by its discriminating understanding of individuals and that involves the represented worldly individuals.

This was Evans's radical project. If he could make it work, then it suggests the possibility that thought and experience can be genuinely singular – conceptual and world-involving – not only in their referential but also in their attributive capacities. His project suggests this possibility even if he himself did not explore it at the time he wrote *The Varieties of Reference*. But given his project, the possibility becomes available – even readily available. Finding the combination that unlocks Pandora's box frees all of its inhabitants and possibilities.

Here, in minimal outline before we pursue details, is the way in which Evans brings Russell's and Frege's insights together. Evans holds that Russell was correct that there are thoughts or contents that can only be thought if their referent exists. There are Russellian singular terms as well as thoughts: "whose sense depends upon their having a referent" (p.46). But Evans proposes that such thoughts have 'Fregean' senses, that is, that what determines the contents of Russellian singular thoughts is the subject's mode of identifying or individuating the referent. Evans believes that it is another Russellian thesis that directs us to ascribe 'Fregean' senses to singular thoughts. If we agree with Russell's principle that "a subject cannot make a judgment about something unless he knows which object his judgment is about" (p.89), then it will follow that a subject cannot think about a *particular* object without having the ability to identify that object. Russell's principle suggests that the capacity to think singular thoughts involves the capacity to identify the objects of those thoughts; it involves some form of individuating knowledge about those objects. The principle suggests, quite sensibly, no more than "that to entertain a thought, one must know what it would be for the thought to be true." (McDowell, 1990, p.256). In a nutshell, Evans' thesis is that the content of a particular thought is determined by the subject's mode of identifying the object, so that the possibility of the thought depends upon the success of that identification. In the case of demonstrative thoughts of particulars or individuals, Evans argues that it is our understanding of an individual's spatial location that allows us to identify it in a way that uniquely individuates it. The fundamental identification of individuals is a form of spatial thought and such thought, Evans argues, depends on the subject's capacity to be actively engaged with those objects.

This is one of Evans' principal contentions, one that is key for our purposes. Evans argues that our spatial thought is a form of understanding

rather than a reliable discriminatory capacity. He tries to show that spatial identification is a conceptual grasp of an object's location both in relation to oneself and in a more 'objective' or holistic mapping. Because the grasp has a necessarily egocentric component, Evans argues, it is object-involving content rather than the sort of self-standing content that does not involve the represented individual. Yet it requires conceptual understanding. This strand in Evans' work – the idea that our awareness of spatial particulars integrates two modes of identification, an egocentric and a holistic one – has figured in subsequent interest in the nature of spatial representation and spatial thought. Much empirical and philosophical work has come together on this topic.<sup>10</sup> It would be fair to say that there is some agreement that spatial representation combines egocentric and holistic identifications of spatial particulars as Evans' suggested.

The significance for theories of perception is quite clear. It is not only individuals but also their properties that are spatially located. What if Evans is correct that our ability to discriminate or individuate spatial particulars (i) is a form of understanding for which a reliable causal process is necessary but not sufficient; (ii) that yields content that is "in part" egocentric, involving both the subject and the individual? If this line of thought is correct, then it might apply no less to the properties of individuals than to the individuals.

What is the difference between individuals and properties? Individual instances of properties are instances of kinds. This is to say that they are both determinate particulars and members of kinds. To experience a determinate instance of a property is to experience: a spatially located particular that belongs to a kind so that other individuals might have determinate instances of this kind. But Evans argues that singular thought of spatial individuals requires that we grasp both the unique individuality of that object, as it were, and its membership in a kind (at least the kind: object or individual that might have a variety of properties located at  $x$ ). This will be clearer when I detail his account of conceptual capacities as essentially recombinatory along attributive and referential dimensions respectively – a capacity is conceptual insofar it allows a subject to attribute different properties to one object and to attribute the same property to different objects. If Evans is on the right track about the referentially and attributively recombinatory nature of conceptual capacities – which entails some grasp that individuals are potential bearers of different properties and that properties potentially characterize different individuals – and if he is on the right track about

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, see *Spatial Representation*, edited by Eilan, N., McCarthy R., and Brewer, B., 1993.



the nature of spatial identification, he supplies a fruitful model for both the referential and attributive functions of perceptual content.<sup>11</sup>

But is Evans' project on the right track? He faces an uphill struggle to convince us on both key points: (i) that spatial identification is a variety or form of understanding, and (ii) that spatial thought involves its objects. If he can marshal a convincing case for both, he explains that we are capable of genuinely singular thought of spatial particulars – and provides a model for perceptual engagement.

Despite its apparently uncontroversial nature, let's start from Evans' understanding of conceptual capacities in terms of their generality. Note that he does not claim to give an exhaustive account of what makes capacities conceptual.

In discussing the nature of our conceivings we have little enough to go on, but there is one fundamental constraint that must be observed in all our reflections: I shall call it 'The Generality Constraint.' (p.100)

Here is Evans' summary statement:

if a subject can be credited with the thought that a is F, then he must have the conceptual resources for entertaining the thought that a is G, for every property of being G of which he has a conception. This is the condition that I call "The Generality Constraint". (p. 104)

Though many theorists – including many who propose nonconceptual contents – endorse this constraint, it is not clear that they share the approach to concepts as *capacities* or *abilities* that this often-cited summary was intended to encapsulate.

Consider Evans' detailed development of this idea. Evans suggests that thought must be structured not in the sense that subjects use "symbols," or more generally that thoughts are "composed of *elements*," but in the sense that a thought is a "complex of abilities" (p. 101). Evans uses linguistic understanding as an analogy to show that insofar as a subject can understand the sentences 'Fa' and 'Gb' – or entertain the thoughts 'Fa' or 'Gb' – she can also understand the sentences 'Fb' and 'Ga,' and there is a common explanation of her understanding of 'Fa' and 'Ga' and of her understanding of 'Fb' and 'Gb'. Similarly, there is a "common partial explanation for a subject's having the thought that a is F and his having the thought that a is G:

---

<sup>11</sup> To avert misunderstanding here is an important qualification. To argue that Evans is on the right track is not to say that his work on singular thought of spatial particulars gives us all the resources we need to understand determinate instances of properties. What he provides is a model, a model that we need to elaborate, refine and bring together with a broad range of empirical research concerning the subpersonal processes that enable perceptual engagement. I will return to taking Evans' work as something like a model shortly.

there is a single state whose possession is a necessary condition for the occurrence of both thoughts” (p. 102). Moreover, “each of the abilities involved in the thought that *a* is *F*, though separable, can be exercised only in a (whole) thought – and hence always together with some other conceptual ability. This is the analogue of the fact that the understanding of a word is manifested only in the understanding of sentences, and hence always together with the understanding of other words” (p. 102).

The disanalogy between thoughts and sentences is that while sentences might be unstructured, thoughts are essentially structured. Evans suggests that we can imagine introducing a one-word sentence by stipulation to have a meaning that would normally be expressed by a structured sentence.<sup>12</sup> In contrast,

it simply is not a possibility for the thought that *a* is *F* to be unstructured – that is, not to be the exercise of two distinct abilities. It is a feature of the thought-content *that John is happy* that to grasp it requires distinguishable skills. In particular it requires possession of the concept of happiness – knowledge of what it is for a person to be happy; and that is something not tied to this or that particular person’s happiness. (pp.102-103)

[A]ny thought [...] having the content *that a is F* involves the exercise of an ability – knowledge of what it is for something to be *F* – which would be exercised in indefinitely many distinct thoughts, and would be exercised in, for instance, the thought that *b* is *F*. Similarly for the thought that *a* is *G*. And this of course implies the existence of a corresponding kind of ability, the ability to think of a particular object. For there must be a capacity which, when combined with a knowledge of what it is in general for an object to be *F*, yields the ability to entertain the thought that *a* is *F*, or at least a knowledge of what it is, or would be, for *a* to be *F*. ... (p.103)

We thus see the thought that *a* is *F* as lying at the intersection of two series of thoughts: on the one hand, the series of thoughts that *a* is *F*, that *b* is *F*, that *c* is *F*, [and so on], and, on the other hand, the series of thoughts that *a* is *F*, that *a* is *G*, and that *a* is *H*, [and so on]. (p.104, footnote 21)

But here is more:

Even readers not persuaded that *any* system of thought must conform to the Generality Constraint may be prepared to admit that the system of

---

<sup>12</sup> I think that Evans has in mind something along the lines of Wittgenstein’s point at the bottom of page 18e in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

“Can I say “bububu” and mean “If it does not rain I shall go for a walk?” – It is only in a language that I can mean something by something. This shews clearly that the grammar of “to mean” is not like that of the expression “to imagine” and the like.”

thought we possess – the system that underlies our use of language – does conform to it. (It is one of the fundamental differences between human thought and the information-processing that takes place in our brains that the Generality Constraint applies to the former but not the latter. When we attribute to the brain computations whereby it localizes the sounds we hear, we *ipso facto* ascribe to it representations of the speed of sound and of the distance between the ears, without any commitment to the idea that it should be able to represent the speed of light or the distance between anything else.) (p. 104, footnote 22)

In short, a capacity is conceptual if it is recombinatory along referential and attributive dimensions: if it involves grasping that a property of a certain object “is not tied to this or that” individual object, and that a particular object might have other properties as well as those being perceived or considered. (I shall drop the qualification “along referential and attributive dimensions respectively” from here, using the shorter phrase that our capacities are recombinatory to stand for Evans’ precise idea of the specific recombinatorial capacity at issue for conceptuality). Such re-combinatorial capacities distinguish human thought from the adaptive discriminatory capacities that enable the coupling of animals with their habitats. It is such recombinatorial capacities that constitute our grasp of objects as possessing various properties and of properties as the features of various objects.

Evans points out that with this account of the conceptual as a theoretical background or framework, Russell’s belief in the importance of individuating knowledge should not seem controversial. It is simply or “truistically enough” “the idea that, in order for a subject to be credited with the thought that *p*, he must know what it is for it be the case that *p*.” (p. 105) His point is that we can start from uncontroversial premises about concepts to reach conclusions that go against the flow of theories of reference. The premises’ good sense should give one pause – at the very least – when it comes to reacting against the conclusions.

Evans takes the Russellian idea – that to think about something requires knowing what you are thinking about – to argue for a fundamental “level” of thought – or better an aspect of thought or a capacity wherein we grasp a ground of difference that is “fundamental” in that it distinguishes a particular object of a certain kind from all others.

For any object whatever then, there is what may be called the *fundamental ground of difference* of that object (at a time). This will be a specific answer to the question ‘What differentiates that object from others?’ of the kind appropriate to objects of that sort. For example, the fundamental ground of difference of the number *three* is being the third number in the series of numbers; the fundamental ground of differ-

ence of the shape *square* is having four equal sides joined at right angles, and so on. (p. 107)

Evans believes that “we do very often employ such fundamental Ideas of objects in our thinking about them, but even when we do not, I want to suggest that such Ideas play a very central role in our thinking.” (pp. 107-8)

Together, the Generality Constraint and the innocuous thought that to think about a particular object one must be able to individuate an object, lead to the conclusion that demonstrative thoughts that depend on on-going informational contact with an object require understanding for which the informational contact is not sufficient. That is, when Evans turns to demonstrative thought of individuals with these commitments in place, he is in a position to show that an on-going causal link is necessary but not sufficient.

It is the spatiality of such objects that renders an informational-link insufficient. In and of itself, a camera-like connection with an object cannot supply the understanding of “what makes it the case that an object, distinguished as the occupant of a position in space, is that object.” (p. 149) An organism might be able “to respond differentially to those different values of the proximal stimulus which code the direction” of the input, without being able to represent the input spatially. The ability to respond differentially to spatial stimuli is not sufficient to attribute to the organism the ability to represent those stimuli as being located at different distal positions in space.

Rather, the subject needs to have some understanding of what makes it the case that the object she has in mind is a certain object out there at a unique position in space. What is at issue is a nexus of capacities to which activity is crucial. Self-initiated activity is important in that it allows a subject, take me for example, to integrate an egocentric mode of identifying the object – relative to myself, as it were on axes that radiate outwards from my potentialities for action – with an objective or holistic mapping that locates the object with respect to others. Such integration is possible insofar as I grasp myself as a physical object among others. But note that I do so through the mutually constitutive inter-dependence between an irreducibly egocentric mode of identification and an objective mode of identification. Evans argues that one can have an objective mode of identification only insofar as one has an egocentric one – and vice versa – one can only have an egocentric mode of identification insofar as one has an objective one. This is because it is spatial particulars that are being identified, oneself and other objects, and there is only one objective space, but we only grasp that space through our own activity. Moreover, generality concerning spatial particulars – about oneself as an object among others as well as about other individual objects – requires that one can integrate an egocentric mode of

thought with an objective one and the egocentric one can only arise from activity. This yields Evans' radical conclusion: that demonstrative thought of spatial particulars has objective reference and a partially egocentric sense. Thought of spatio-temporal particulars is genuinely singular in the sense that: (i) it requires an on-going informational link; (ii) has objective reference to objects in public space; (iii) an objective reference that is secured by a discriminating understanding that is partially egocentric.

If Evans' analysis is correct – and it is, at the very least, an insightful and theoretically suggestive analysis – it offers a way to understand that demonstrative spatial thought is a conceptual contentful capacity that involves its objects. This is what I characterized as Evans' radical, overarching aim and what I needed to extract from Evans' account so as to apply it to perceptual content. Two questions remain: why does Evans not extend this analysis of demonstrative thought to perception, and is there good reason to extend his approach nevertheless?

Why does Evans not extend this same sort of account to the content of perceptual experience? Despite his commitment to generality, Evans subscribes to something like 'order-effects' when it comes to conceptual capacities. One might discuss constitutive underlying commitments for this view. But in this paper, let's just consider what happens if we believe that conceptual capacities admit something like temporal, transformative 'order-effects' – and what happens if we do not. This is a divergence between Evans and a conceptualist like myself that does not undercut agreement over the radical aims of his project.

What do I mean by 'order-effects'? Very simply, this is the view that when conceptual capacities are involved perception, such capacities conceptual-ize – they conceptual-ize an aspect or ingredient of mental life that is not conceptual to yield perceptual judgment. This is precisely Evans' pre-supposition about perception.

The informational states which a subject acquires through perception are *non-conceptual*, or *non-conceptualized*. Judgments *based upon* such states necessarily involve conceptualization: in moving from a perceptual experience to a judgment about the world (usually expressible in some verbal form), one will be exercising basic conceptual skills. [...] The process of conceptualization or judgment takes the subject from his being in one kind of informational state (with a content of a certain kind, namely, non-conceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content). (p. 227)

Is there an alternative? How might conceptual capacities be in play if not in a way that allows for a transformative ordering – a before and after, that 'be-

fore and after' pictures display – such as Evans has in mind with the notion of '*conceptualization*'?

To discuss what is at issue in a short space, let's borrow an image from Sellars (though not the account wherein the image figures).<sup>13</sup> What about the 'chess-entry' move that starts off a game of chess? Or the language-entry move that starts off a discussion, as when I might say "look, that poppy is blue!" Is there a transformative ordering, a 'before-and-after' in either case?

Sellars' image of an "entry" or an entry-move is useful because it pulls in both directions, presupposing the logic of 'before-and-after' pictures while pulling away from it as well. Sellars' image clearly invites discussion that presupposes that we are in a logical dimension where ordering is possible. After all, making an entrance presupposes a before and after – that is just what the idea of entering is all about, I enter from somewhere to somewhere else. The image of an entry is the image of a transition, of passing from one state to another as when we pass from one room to another, or from the outdoors into a familiar house. Evans is not alone in supposing that an entrance is made from the nonconceptual to the space of judgments. The image of a 'chess-entry move' invites precisely the view that Evans shares with many other theorists: an 'entry-move' 'takes' something that is not chess, applies the rules and voilà: 'it's a pawn moving to...' Similarly, when a subject sees that 'that poppy is blue,' the subject moves from a perceptual experience to a judgment, moving by means of a "process of conceptualization" from an informational state (with nonconceptual content) to a cognitive state (with conceptual content).

But do I chess-ualize when I begin a game? Does chess-ualization occur when the game begins? The idea of a 'game-entry' move – for beginning or initiating a game – pushes us away from the 'before-and after' image even while the seductive pull of that imagery is pre-supposed. Of course there is a transition – in some sense – from not playing chess to playing chess. But the issue is, in starting the game, do rules begin to apply that did not apply before, taking the board (like Evans' subject) from being in one kind of state – one where the rules of chess do not yet apply – to another kind of state – where the rules do apply?

It is not that the rules of chess do not apply and then begin to apply. Rather, they always apply so long as one has the requisite abilities. Sometimes we initiate a game using the rules. More often than not when it

---

<sup>13</sup> Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language Games," 1963. In this paper, Sellars develops his own very precise proposal about rule-following in general and language in particular – using notions such as language entry transitions and language departure transitions – which he refers back to Wittgenstein's locus classicus in his title; though when he does refer to another philosopher's work on rule-following within the paper, it is rather to Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind*.

comes to chess we do not – we play games of chess only intermittently, after all. But when we initiate a game we do not ‘transform’ what is not yet a chess board with chess pieces. When I start to play a game, I do so insofar as I grasp the rules and it is the fact that I grasp the rules that makes my movement a move in the game – perhaps the first move, which is our focus here. It is the background of capacities that I have – which are in no sense all being deployed – which make a certain motion a chess move. How are those capacities relevant? To start a game is to activate or bring a certain region of rules ‘into play’, pardon the pun. Why the metaphor? We need to talk of potentialities with the caveat that there are many unwanted resonating echoes in this domain (one might think of dispositions, for just one example). But this is the region of logical space we need to explore to hit on just the right explanation, a region that is different from the region of ‘before and after’ pictures that involve transitions in the sense of transformations.

Just as the image of a *transformation* is not apt for what occurs when one begins a game of chess, so the image is not apt for what occurs as one makes a ‘perceptual judgment’ – or preferably, what occurs as one sees that a poppy is, very surprisingly, blue. We need to work on good ways to make this point. One way to make it might use Evans’ idea of the Generality Constraint. Does this come as a surprise? Suppose I point out a blue poppy to you saying, “That poppy is blue!” What makes this a meaningful utterance? It is meaningful insofar as I could say more of the same – more relevant claims that recombine along referential and attributive dimensions respectively as Evans suggested. One might add that my exclamation is meaningful insofar as other statements (or exclamations, questions, requests, etc.) are standing ready to be spoken if it became reasonable or rationally appropriate to do so. Though this last qualification about appropriateness adds imagery to Evans’ Generality Constraint, it comes to the same. Recall that according to Evans, a meaningful sentence *lies* “at the intersection of two series of thoughts.” The intersection is not between actual series, but between potential series – series that a subject could entertain or has the capacity to entertain. A sentence lies at such an intersection insofar as the subject has more of the same to say and to think – along the referential and attributive dimensions. And a subject *would* say or think more if it became appropriate to do so or if she chose to go on to do so. To return to our example, what is standing in readiness is more of the same – the capacity to think or to say “That poppy is true blue! How rare! Just like the blue of my *delphinium*.” or “That poppy is *exquisite*.” or perhaps “Are you sure that is true blue, it is very shady here.”

Note that if it is the fact that there is more of the same that I could say that makes what I do say meaningful, this holds whether what I say is an opening gambit or not. The same holds for chess. It is the fact that I can make more appropriate (and related) moves that makes my opening gambit a move that starts a game of chess. It is not that I take what is not yet a chess-board and render it one with my opening gambit. I do not chess-ualize.

This core conceptualist commitment does not deny that perception is special. What it denies is that what makes perception special is captured with the image of an entry or a transition that takes us from one kind of state to a very different one, as when one enters from the outdoors into the familiar space of one's house. What makes perception special is to be found not in further refinements – or epicycles – of this old imagery and its attendant logic. What makes perception special is that it is a mode of engagement with individuals and their determinate properties.

And Evans is one theorist who gives us resources for understanding the engagement that is special to perception, without any need to slip back into the old imagery of transformations and 'before-and-after' pictures. Why not take his radical insights as far as they will go? If there is a good respect of analogy between the first move in a game of chess and a demonstrative utterance that opens a conversation about what we both see, the further analogy to perceptual experiences is straightforward and should come as no surprise. When I see *that blue poppy*, it is not the case that I conceptualize what is not already a blue poppy in my experience. The logic of 'before-and-after pictures' does not apply. (Though note that if one identifies (i) the external facts that figure in explanations of persons, with (ii) the external facts that figure in explanations of their subpersonal processes – so that the external contextual facts that figure in explanations of persons are the same as the external facts that figure in explanations of our subpersonal processes – then the logic of transformations, of 'before-and-after pictures' is compulsory.<sup>14</sup>)

It would be a welcome bonus if someone whose commitments do not already predispose them towards this view might find this sketch convincing. But that was not the task set for this discussion. The task was to identify a divergence in understanding of conceptual capacities between Evans and a contemporary conceptualist, a divergence that does not undercut agreement over the radical aims of Evans work. The difference I have identified is the divergence (whose motivations run as deep as any) that makes Evans stop his account at judgments and that makes the conceptualist extend Evans' account to perceptual experiences. It is the difference that allows a

---

<sup>14</sup> My "Perceptual Engagement with the World" develops an extended argument for this point.



conceptualist to share in Evans' project while making one key departure: changing Evans' account of perceptual experience from an informational state with nonconceptual content to an account of perceptual experience as engagement that has conceptual object- and property-involving content. Denying that the conceptual admits a 'before and after' picture allows one to take Evans' radical project about demonstrative thought and turn it towards perception as well.

To be more precise, what a conceptualist can do is to take the explanatory resources from Evans' account of the content of demonstrative spatial thought of individuals and use them for explaining perceptual content. Or perhaps, somewhat more strongly, a conceptualist can consider the main explanatory moves in Evans' account of demonstratives as a fruitful model for explaining the content of perceptual engagement.

It is important to be clear about this since it preempts the following sort of objection. The charge can and has been laid that a conceptualist like McDowell overlooks that experience cannot be constituted by demonstrative concepts because demonstrative content is itself anchored by experience.<sup>15</sup> Let's take both aspects of this charge in turn: first, the presupposition that demonstrative content is "anchored" by experience; second, the charge that conceptualism holds that experience is "constituted" by demonstrative concepts.

That experience "anchors" demonstrative concepts is one of the dividing issues between nonconceptualism and conceptualism and so it cannot be presupposed as an objection to conceptualism. Conceptualism takes a holistic approach to beliefs and perceptions. Highlighting the holistic relations among what I see and what I say – and what I think – stresses the mutual inter-dependence among our capacities rather than a uni-directional flow from perception 'inwards.' To the extent that conceptualism includes epistemic and semantic holism, it offers an alternative package to the commitments that the objection voices. Demonstrative concepts are just one among a whole host of our capacities that need to be available in potentiality, that

---

<sup>15</sup> See "Conceptualist Views of Content" (§6.1) in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for the summary statement of this charge, and Heck, Jr. (2000) for an elaborate development of it. Aside from the charge that conceptualism cannot have it both ways, as it were – that demonstrative concepts cannot both constitute experience and be anchored by experience – there seems to be widespread belief in at least one half of this conjunction: namely, that conceptualism proposes that concepts constitute perceptual experience. Here is a representative quotation from Kelly that opens his "Demonstrative Concepts and Experience" (2001). "Their [the conceptualists] claim, more precisely, is that every perceptual experience is such that, of necessity, its content is constituted entirely by concepts possessed by the subject having the experience." (pp. 397-8).

might be standing ready or perhaps even activated as we perceive. To be sure, I can only say “Look at that blue” if both you and I are looking at the same poppy. But this does not require an explanation that posits that our shared understanding of the demonstrative ‘that blue’ is *based on or anchored by* our perceptions. Rather, our perceptions have a special role (epistemic in part, if you will) insofar as they engage us with our surroundings – but they can only be perceptions of objects and properties to the extent that they involve individuating understanding of properties and objects. Though he allowed his holistic account to stray into coherentism, Sellars had a wonderful way of putting this point:

The metaphor of “foundation” is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.

*Above all*, the picture is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it all begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once. (Sellars, 1997, pp.78-79.)

Secondly, nothing in my account suggests that demonstrative concepts “constitute” perceptual experience. Indeed, my aim is to make clear the conceptualist alternative. That is part of the point of presenting Evans’ approach in detail. Recall that Evans’ suggests that concepts are capacities and that singular thought is a “complex” of capacities. Such capacities are conceptual insofar as they satisfy certain fairly exacting requirements. To suggest all this is to propose that singular thought is conceptual insofar as it is a “complex” of capacities that satisfies the specified requirements. A range of capacities is both activated and standing in the wings as I see with marvel what I could express by saying “that poppy is true blue!” It is crucial to such capacities that they allow recombination along both the referential and attributive dimensions respectively – so that while I am looking at the poppy, I might also recall the red and yellow and orange *poppies* I have seen, or wonder whether *this blue* is really as true as the blue of my delphinium. But it is important not to confuse the two conceptualist claims that (i) I can only express what I see by using demonstrative concepts like “that blue,” and that (ii) such demonstrative contents can be used as models for explaining perceptual content; with the altogether different claim that demonstrative concepts *constitute* perceptual contents. It is not conceptualism that suggests that concepts literally constitute perceptual contents (whatever

that might be). Explanations of linguistic content can stand as models for accounts of other kinds of mental contents without any implication that linguistic contents constitute those kinds of contents. There is good reason why we have detailed analyses of different kinds of linguistic contents. Language is a good – readily and publicly available – place to start. But once we have such analyses, we can help ourselves to the theoretical resources they offer in understanding contents that might seem a little more elusive – like the contents of our thoughts, wishes, fears and perceptions. To use an explanatory model is not to constitute what one is explaining out of the model.

In short, a conceptualist approach like mine offers an alternative to the view that demonstrative content is “anchored by” experience; and in no sense implies that experience is “constituted” by demonstrative concepts. If I want to express what I see, I need to use demonstrative concepts such as “that blue.” This is not to claim that demonstrative concepts “constitute” perceptual experience.

To conclude, here at last is the view of perception that Evans makes available. Like demonstrative thought, perceptual experience has ‘sense’ and ‘reference’: an objective reference and a sense that is egocentric in part. To say this is to identify a kind of conceptual content or a range of conceptual capacities. These capacities come together in our perceptual experience of spatial objects – or as I would prefer to say, in our perceptual engagement with spatial objects. When one perceives an object, one has individuating understanding of the object’s location in space, both relative to one’s own capacities for action and in relation to other objects. Active engagement with objects yields such understanding because one’s awareness of oneself as an individual in space among others and one’s perception of other individuals entail one another.

Now it is my turn to ask: why would not all this be true of our perception of the properties of these objects and not just of the objects themselves?

Objects and properties do not come apart. Properties are spatial particulars – that belong to kinds that are not tied to this or that object – whereas objects are spatial particulars that have a range of various properties. This is the difference between properties and objects captured in Evans’ Generality Constraint. But it is not a difference that renders Evans’ account of spatial thought of objects inapplicable to determinate, spatially located properties. I will elaborate shortly.

But first it is important to emphasize that my point throughout this section is *not* to suggest that *all* we need for explaining perception is to be

found in Evans' *Varieties of Reference*. The point is to show that Evans opens up a fruitful avenue for further research. The point is to show that there is something quite precise and explanatorily adequate at work in the conceptualist likening of perceptual content and demonstrative content. Consider the conceptualist suggestion that perceptual content is like demonstrative thought in both its referential and attributive functions, so that we can explain the conceptual yet determinate nature of a perceptual experience much like we would explain the demonstrative content "that is true blue." What such a conceptualist can have in mind – at the very least – is an account of spatial thought along the lines Evans makes available.

Suppose we do want to continue with Evans' approach a little further – in the clear understanding that conceptualists are not restricted only to Evans' account and invite others to join them in moving forward from this model. Since Evans focuses on the sort of understanding requisite for identifying an object, to extend his account to perception of properties, we need to modify his account of the understanding that a perceiver needs to have. A perceiver needs to have some understanding of what makes it the case that the property she perceives is a certain determinate instance out there at a unique position in space. (i) She needs to understand what it is for something to be *x*, happy or blue, for example. That is, she needs some understanding of the property at issue. (ii) She needs to be able to identify the instance spatially. Her capacity to identify the instance spatially must be recombinatory – it must involve grasping that the property "is not tied to this or that" individual. That is, she must in some sense grasp that there are other instances in order to grasp at all that what she sees is a property – just as, according to Evans, she must grasp that the object she sees might have other properties in order to grasp at all that it is an object she sees.

Consider my perceptual experience of a blue poppy. If I have some understanding of color, and if I can identify that blue of the poppy spatially, then I have a perceptual grasp of that determinate instance that distinguishes it from all others. Moreover, if Evans' account of spatial identification is on track, my perceptual experience – which I could express by saying "that blue" – would have an objective reference with a partly egocentric sense.

Objects and properties do not come apart. This may seem a trivial point but are we sure we recognize it in all its forms and implications? Evans' account of the recombinatory nature of conceptual capacities makes this point. A recombinatory grasp of an object entails that the object might have a range of properties – it might have properties in addition to those currently perceivable. To identify myself as a spatial individual among others is to identify myself as having a range of properties. The same holds for other spatio-temporal objects I identify. Evans is pointing out a complex of capacities that must involve identification of properties *insofar as it is identi-*

*fication of objects.* Objects and properties do not come apart in our identifications of objects and of ourselves – *or it wouldn't be objects that we identify, ourselves among others, in a mutually constitutive package.* The mutually constitutive package that Evans explores, calling it identification of spatio-temporal objects, includes properties. There is no such package without them. Perhaps this entailment has been overlooked.

What distinguishes perception of properties from perception of objects, on Evans' outlook, is that perceiving a property includes grasping that other instances might be tied to other objects, whereas perceiving an object includes grasping that this particular might have other properties. This is the repeatability of properties. It shows up in the recent dictum among theorists of mind that insofar as I can identify a property, I can also re-identify it. More precisely, grasping repeatability requires being able to identify the same determinate property if it recurs or recognizing similar instances. Does perceptual engagement satisfy this condition? That is, does my account of perception as perceptual engagement have the resources to satisfy this requirement? When we focus on repeatability and hence the potential for re-identification, we come across a problem for understanding perception that is not just posed by one's outlook so that on a different outlook it does not seem problematic at all.<sup>16</sup> It is a challenge for all concerned.

#### **4 Engagement and Re-Identification: What Makes Perceptual Engagement Conceptual if Not Persistence?**

A genuine problem that requires that we all – conceptualists and nonconceptualists alike – fine-tune our understanding of conceptual capacities is the so-called re-identification problem. The problem is that it is possible to raise cases where it seems that a subject can identify something that she is later unable to re-identify. The cases are of two sorts. First, there are cases where a subject can make certain pair-wise discriminations – and in that sense, identify each member – yet fail to re-identify either member taken singly. Secondly, there are cases where a subject will fail to re-identify one item across many trials on a better than chance basis. These sorts of cases are taken to show that our discriminatory capacity outruns our capacity to re-identify. Insofar as it is a hallmark of conceptual capacities that conceptual identification entails re-identification, such cases are taken to show that

---

<sup>16</sup> Yes, I am suggesting that many of the problem cases raised by nonconceptualists -- such as illusions, belief encapsulation and geometrical shapes like diamonds – can be explained quite readily from a conceptualist perspective. I regret that space does not permit offering a conceptualist account of each of these sorts of cases here.

we can perceive more than we can identify conceptually (in a way that supports re-identification). Some of our perception at least, it is claimed, is a nonconceptual discriminatory capacity that “outruns” our conceptual capacities.

What is at issue is a coupling of the idea of conceptual thought and the capacity for re-identification. There might be different motivations for believing that conceptual thought involves the capacity to identify its objects or properties and that this must involve the capacity to re-identify those objects or properties. But there seems to be agreement on the condition itself. Here are Diana Raffman’s unequivocal statements from her influential paper, “On the Persistence of Phenomenology”: “if we can identify something whenever we encounter it, then *ipso facto* we can re-identify it” (p. 301), “you can recognize only what you can remember” (p.295). To some, these points seem almost truistic. They are, in any case, common ground between conceptualists and many nonconceptualists.

The same thought is at the heart of Wittgenstein’s investigations of the possibility of keeping a private diary. After all, keeping a diary or keeping track of something is identifying it and re-identifying it. Since this a locus classicus for the re-identification condition, let’s consider it briefly. Wittgenstein’s discussion highlights that there are circumstances in which I cannot make the distinction between it seeming to me that I am keeping track correctly and keeping track correctly: “whatever is going to seem right to me is right.” If I cannot make this distinction, “that only means that here we cannot talk about ‘right’.” (1953, §258) The core idea is that in order to identify something, I must be able to make the distinction that the private diarist cannot. I fail insofar as “whatever is going to seem right to me [or to the diarist] is right.” (§258) This insight has quite a few consequences. For example, it leads us to consider other kinds of circumstances and cases where someone might not be in a position to make the distinction between it seeming to her that she is identifying correctly and identifying correctly.

One such case that Wittgenstein raises is thought or identification involving a sample. Here one might ask, is sheer possession of the sample – isolating possession from any other factors that might be relevant, such as context, etc. – sufficient for identifying (and hence re-identifying) the sample? The private diarist case indicates one condition that we need to consider. Does sheer possession of a sample *allow one to make the distinction that the private diarist cannot?* Let’s say I have a certain sample today and then I have the same sample again tomorrow. Is that sufficient for me to have resources for making a distinction between it seeming to me that I am keeping track correctly and keeping track correctly? No, whatever is going to seem right to me is right. In considering the private diarist, Wittgenstein suggests that the problem is that the diarist lacks independent criteria of

correctness (to which she is responsive). This lack also characterizes cases of sheer possession of a sample.

Wittgenstein's interweaving discussions of different kinds of thoughts alerts us to the fact that different kinds of thoughts involve identification – for example, thoughts that involve a sample as well as thoughts that do not – so that we need to be alert to differences in the way various kinds of thoughts or identifications might satisfy the need for independent criteria of identity. His investigations also lead us to consider how the world might help us out, different aspects of the world helping out more or less in different sorts of cases to provide independent criteria of correctness to which we can be responsive.

Demonstrative thought and – if I am on the right track, perceptual engagement – are examples of kinds of thoughts that involve samples. If sheer possession of a sample will not suffice for re-identification, what more is required?

When we turn to contemporary debates about demonstrative concepts, perception, and re-identification, we find imagery of distance and persistence. The first image suggests that conceptual thought is characterized by a necessary distance between us and what we identify. This was Evans' idea as well: the recombinatory nature of conceptual capacities allows for an alternative to the sort of tight coupling between complex animals and habitats. We might image this as a distancing that gives us some independence from our environments, allowing our thoughts to range over more than is present to us. Wittgenstein's *locus classicus* concerning the relationship between identification and re-identification adds another way to think about what is at issue in the distance metaphor. What some measure of 'distance' (or uncoupling) secures against is that "whatever will seem to me to be right, will be right." Distance is required in the sense that it allows for a distinction between it seeming to me that I am identifying correctly and identifying correctly.

Imagery of persistence seems to be making the same suggestion as well. Being able to keep a sample in mind so that it persists when it is not present also 'de-couples' our thoughts from their context, extending their range, thereby freeing us from our contexts and empowering us, in contrast to the coupling of animals and their contexts.

But it should be clear that my approach goes against the persistence imagery. Approaching perception as perceptual engagement entails that perceptual content does not persist. If perceptual richness is correctly understood as engagement with determinate properties and individuals (under perceptual modes of presentation, of course), then such perceptual content does not persist. I have argued that we do not *retain* determinate detail. I have also

argued that there is good reason for this phenomenological datum. Insofar as perception is perceptual engagement, when we are no longer engaged with a determinate instance of a property, we cannot represent it with matching determinacy because the determinacy is the determinacy of the sample – under our perceptual modes of presentation to be sure.

Noting that perceptual engagement fails the ‘persistence condition’ seems to make our question more pressing: if perception is perceptual engagement, does it satisfy the conditions for conceptual thought and what sort of re-identification does it allow? This is the question that came up at the end of examining Evans’ work, now filled-out by considerations from a different avenue of argumentation. I suggest that the problem cases raised by nonconceptualists lead us towards the answer, though not the nonconceptualist answer.

Nonconceptualists ask us to examine situations where we can make a pairwise discrimination but where we cannot reliably or consistently re-identify either of the stimuli taken singly. The cases can be actual empirical experiments or thought experiments. The experimental scenarios might concern perceptual stimuli such as color patches that we can barely discriminate or perhaps actual individual objects or items like paint chips. Let’s start with the richer case where items or objects are at issue. Sean Dorrance Kelly asks us to imagine a subject distinguishing between a square and a triangle consistently. We are to imagine that the same subject is subsequently shown the same triangle ten times. The result of this thought experiment is that there is no reason to suppose that the subject could identify what he is shown as the same triangle better than chance – more than five times out of ten. Alternatively, we are to imagine a subject who can discriminate between two colour samples of very similar colors (shades of green). When the subject is presented ten times with one of those color chips “It is perfectly conceivable that the subject might not be able to re-identify this shade consistently.” “It’s perfectly conceivable, in other words, and there’s nothing about the nature of *perception* to keep it from being true, that our capacity to discriminate colors exceeds our capacity to re-identify the colors discriminated” (Kelly, 2001, p. 411).

I do not contest that I can imagine what I am being asked to imagine. Rather, the problem is that I can imagine too much else along these lines. And this helps us identify what is amiss. These sorts of cases generalize in a way that extends the nonconceptualist conclusion to absurdity, making us think about what is going wrong in such cases.

A year ago I was so struck by the beauty of a square pottery plate that I succumbed to the temptation to buy an extra one for myself, in addition to buying a barely discriminable one as a wedding present. The square of pottery is glazed in a deep yet vivid shade of red with a single curving blaze of



mid blue off to one side. I could barely discriminate among the stack of such platters, but enough at any rate to pick one for myself and one for my friend – with the help of the patient shop owner who obligingly held up pairs for me to choose between. Since that day this square field of vibrant red with a blue slash sits on a bookcase in my dining room and I walk past it several times every day. We are in the domain of a thousand or more such encounters by now. There is no doubt that I re-identify the platter correctly several times a day. Yet I can also imagine that I would fail the re-identification test as it is presented in discussions such as the one I cited above. Actually, I am quite sure that I would fail. Present me ten (or more times) with the same platter and only that platter outside of any context and I would not re-identify it better than chance. I couldn't be sure whether I was seeing the same platter and I would take one stab after another at identifying it.

Once these sorts of discrimination cases set me thinking about my square of red pottery, I couldn't help but think about the intricately patterned multi-color Persian carpet in my living room next door. While the pottery square is stunning in its simplicity, the adjacent carpet is striking in its intricacy. Spanning ten years, my encounters with the carpet are well into many thousands. Yet if I was presented with it, just by itself over and over again, could I consistently re-identify it? I do not think so. And this holds true for all the individual objects in my house.

What is going wrong here? Do these cases suggest that *all* perceptual content – of all individuals as well as properties – is nonconceptual in the sense that it fails the “re-identification condition”? Some might hold this position, but most nonconceptual content theorists would not for very good reasons (that one might mischievously dub epistemic). If it does not make good theoretical sense to suggest that all perceptual identification of objects is nonconceptual and fails the re-identification condition, what has gone wrong? And what can we learn from it?

When I consider any individual object with which I am intimately acquainted, I find that I could not consistently re-identify it in the sort of scenario that the discrimination trials use. The reason is that in the imagined kind of scenario, it is not possible for me to make a distinction between it seeming to me that I am identifying (or re-identifying) the platter correctly and re-identifying it correctly. I cannot make that distinction all by myself in a completely decontextualized scenario.

What the discrimination thought experiments and actual experiments show, in part, is that identification is not a decontextualized isolatable capacity. That is not how identification works. Should this come as a surprise? What if we think about Evans' work on the capacities involved in the

identification of spatial particulars? What he points to is a “complex” of capacities that includes an understanding of the sort of object at issue, which is, at the very least an understanding of it as an occupant (that might have a variety of properties) in space in relation both to myself and to other objects. I can identify my red platter consistently because walking through my dining room I have access to a lot of facts about it that help me out – such as that we are both in my dining room. If you decontextualize both me and the object, so that I have no understanding I can draw on to help identify the object, then even if it is a beloved object with which I have often been engaged, there is no reason to suppose that I can identify it better than chance. What, in such a condition, can allow me to answer the following question: Is this the platter I was just shown or another one barely distinguishable from it? There is no answer I can give to this question. But if you put the platter on my bookshelf, the worldly facts with which I engage can help me out. That is, I can use them to help myself given all the understanding that I can marshal.

I am suggesting that the discrimination scenarios would apply to all the ordinary spatio-temporal individual objects with which we engage perceptually – except the faces of human beings. There is much that we do not understand yet about facial recognition, but one of the facts that we know and that make it striking is that facial recognition survives decontextualized discrimination tests. We can recognize human faces out of context – that is, we can recognize them in very different and novel contexts where the sort of contextual understanding that we have is just as inapplicable or unhelpful as the no-context conditions that characterize discrimination trials. Faces are a fascinating limiting or exceptional case to identification of spatial particulars.

If this line of reasoning is correct, it indicates that discrimination trials do teach us something, but not what the nonconceptualist suggests. Such cases do not teach us that some identification, specifically identification of certain properties, is nonconceptual. This is because the cases extend far beyond the sorts of contents at which a nonconceptualist is aiming. Since such cases extend to all identification of spatial individuals – except human faces – this would render all perceptual identification nonconceptual. Rather these cases indicate just how rich conceptual identification is. Take away the context and the understanding that is integral to identification of spatio-temporal particulars, identification fails.

Since I am using my own experiences throughout this paper – contrary to the nonconceptualist charge that conceptualists are not motivated by the nature of perceptual experience and that “there does not seem to be any obvious phenomenological reason to hold such a [conceptualist] view,” (Kelly,

2001, p.401)<sup>17</sup> – let me continue in what is not mere indulgence, to indicate how my exercises in phenomenology come together with my broader philosophical training. Once I started examining my own perceptual experiences of individual objects and their properties in light of the discrimination trials, I couldn't help but think of Wittgenstein's private diarist passage. The two scenarios – bare discrimination tests and private diary keeping – have something in common, after all. To be sure, a private diarist and a subject in a discrimination trial differ in that the former is trying to keep track of one of his own mental episodes whereas the latter is trying to keep track of a spatial object. Yet, the scenarios are similar in that they are both completely de-contextualized. Neither the diarist nor the discriminating subject has a context for their exercise, a context on which they might draw. The private diarist has no help from the world and neither does the discriminating subject (and the world includes persons, constitutively members of communities, but there is no need in this paper to belabor what the world is). Let me repeat – the private diarist has no help from the world and neither does the subject in discrimination trials. I am tempted to say that this similarity is important. Without intending to do so, framers of such experiments (whether they be real experiments or thought experiments) reduce the conditions of normal perception to a decontextualized setting where it should not be surprising that a subject cannot make a distinction between it seeming to her that she is keeping track and keeping track. Where a subject lacks the resources for making this distinction, we have no reason to imagine performance that is better than chance. Where performance is not better than chance, we cannot attribute understanding. On this last claim we all agree. Perhaps these sorts of trials should make us recall not only Wittgenstein but also J.J. Gibson (with whose work Evans was impressed and

---

<sup>17</sup> Kelly goes on to assert that philosophers motivated by phenomenology are “typically” nonconceptualists and that conceptualists are not motivated by phenomenology. I mention this since it is not an a-typical attitude. It strikes me as a less than un-prejudicial characterization of the positions. “Indeed, those philosophers motivated by the phenomenology of perception clearly reject the idea [“that perceptual content is characterized by something conceptual”]. They typically think that the content of experience is in some way richer, more complicated, or more fine-grained than the content of thought, and therefore that perception ought not to be characterized in terms of the elements of thought at all. McDowell and Brewer are not motivated by the phenomenology of perception. Rather, they are motivated by a certain kind of *epistemological* concern.” (pp.401-402)

Lest it seem that I am picking on Kelly's paper in particular, allow me to clarify that my quotations are also a compliment to the clarity of that paper.

whose notion of information he was using).<sup>18</sup> Recall Gibson's point that if we strap a subject into a chair, immobilizing all but her eyes, we cannot expect to learn much about perception. Similarly, if we decontextualize what the subject perceives, we cannot expect identification and we cannot expect to learn much about lived, real world perception.

So far, I have argued that 'sheer possession' of a sample (for example, in conditions that neutralize understanding, do not allow for independent criteria of correctness, etc.) is not sufficient for understanding. What more does perception require? I have suggested that one way to think about this is to ask: what more is needed to enable a person to make a distinction between it seeming to her that she is identifying correctly and identifying correctly? This is the sort of 'distance' from one's reactions or discriminations (however reliable they might be) that is needed for consistent identification that we would call conceptual. A detailed examination lies beyond the scope of this paper. But it is important to note that such a detailed examination would help elaborate our understanding of the capacities we call conceptual – capacities that are recombinatory along referential and predicative dimensions, that allow for re-identification, that require more than "whatever is going to seem right to me is right." In this paper, I have been focusing on the importance of one's spatio-temporal context (in the sense appropriate for persons, namely the world). I am suggesting that when it comes to perceptual engagement with spatio-temporal particulars (individuals and their determinate properties), the spatio-temporal context and our understanding of it supplies what we need.

Recall my suggestion that my capacity to re-identify my red pottery square makes use of the fact that we are both in my dining room. Evans' work can help us understand this. Evans insists that spatial identification involves the integration of egocentric and holistic mappings. The holistic mapping locates the red pottery square vis-à-vis other objects in my dining room (and locates my dining room vis-à-vis other rooms in my house, my house vis-à-vis others on my street, my street vis-à-vis others in Toronto, Toronto vis-à-vis other cities in Ontario, and so on.)

What if I visit my friend in Connecticut, and find myself struck by a red pottery square in her home? My understanding that I am on a farm in Connecticut would enable me to identify that pottery plate as not mine but the one I gave to her. Alternatively, I can also imagine failing to identify correctly – but only momentarily. Walking into her house I might be surprised to see my plate on her shelf – but I would immediately correct myself.

---

<sup>18</sup> Evans begins his section, "The Informational System" by giving a Gibsonian characterization of the notion of information that refers the reader to Gibson's *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1968).

Standing in her living room, after flying into LaGuardia and driving to her farm, I could make the distinction between it seeming to me that I am identifying my red plate and identifying my red plate. I would realize immediately that this is her plate and not mine.

This is the sort of competent perceptual re-identification of individuals and properties that we can expect. The question was: if perception is engagement as I have tried to suggest, can it satisfy the conditions on conceptual thought? Can it satisfy re-identification – imagined not in a decontextualized setting but in the sort of real-world settings that do not neutralize all understanding? Yes, it can.

What perceptual engagement does not do is to allow ‘persistence’ in the sense that I can continue to enjoy content of the same determinacy once I am no longer engaged with the individual or property. But the fact that it does not allow for the imagery of persistence does not render it non conceptual. Not all conceptual contents are the same. That is part of the point of detailing interesting varieties of conceptual contents. Perceptual contents satisfy the hallmark conditions on conceptual contents. They do not satisfy the idea that conceptual contents persist. They had better not or we would be disengaged from the world.

Our sense of just how wonderful perception is and our concern to understand our place in the world – our theory of mind, of world, of language and our epistemic concerns – can come together seamlessly when we allow ourselves to notice that we are perceptually engaged with the world.

## References

- Eilan, N., McCarthy, R., and Brewer, B., (Eds). 1993. *Spatial Representation, problems in philosophy and psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, G. 1982. *Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gibson, J.J. 1968. *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Haugeland, J. 1998. Mind Embodied and Embedded. In *Having Thought*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 207-237.
- Heck, Jr., R. G. 2000. Nonconceptual Content and the “Space of Reasons.” *The Philosophical Review*, 109, 4: 483-523.
- Hurley, S.L. 1998. *Consciousness in Action*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Kelly, S.D. 2001. Demonstrative Concepts and Experience. *The Philosophical Review*, 110, 3: 397-420.

- McDowell, J. 1986. Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space. *Subject, Thought, and Context*, ed P. Pettit, P. and J. McDowell, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 137-168.
- McDowell, J. 1990. Peacocke and Evans on Demonstrative Content. *Mind*, XCIX, 394: 255-266.
- McDowell, J. 1994. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- O'Regan, J.K., Rensink, R.A., Clark, J.J. 1999. Change Blindness as a result of 'Mudsplashes'. *Nature*, 398: 34 et sq.
- Raffman, D. 1995. On the Persistence of Phenomenology, *Conscious Experience*, ed. T. Metzinger, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 293-308.
- Rensink, R.A., O'Regan, J.K., Clark, J.J., 1997. To see or not to see: The need for Attention to Perceive Changes in Scenes. *Psychological Science*, 8: 368-373.
- Ryle, G. 1949. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sedivy, S. 2004a. Wittgenstein's Diagnosis of Empiricism's Third Dogma: Why perception is not an amalgam of sensation and conceptualization. *Philosophical Investigations*, 27, 1: 1-33.
- Sedivy, S. 2004b. Minds: Contents without Vehicles. *Philosophical Psychology*, 17, 2: 149-179.
- Sedivy, S. 2006. Perceptual Engagement with the World, starting afresh with disjunctivism, *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, ed. A. Haddock, and F. Macpherson, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Sellars, W. 1963. Some Reflections on Language Games. Reprinted in *Science, Perception, and Reality*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul, Ltd.
- Sellars, W. 1997. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Siegel, S. 2006. The Contents of Perception. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cognitive-science/>, last accessed Nov. 2005.
- Tye, M. 1995. *Ten Problems of Consciousness, A Representational Theory of the Phenomenal Mind*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, Bradford Books.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Third Edition. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

*Sonia Sedivy*  
*University of Toronto*  
*Department of Philosophy*  
*Northrop Frye 218*  
*Toronto ON, Canada, M5S1A2*  
[sonia.sedivy@utoronto.ca](mailto:sonia.sedivy@utoronto.ca)

---

## Nonconceptual Modes of Presentation<sup>1</sup>

MANUEL GARCÍA-CARPINTERO

### Introduction

In a recent paper, Peacocke (2001) continues an ongoing debate with McDowell and others, providing renewed arguments for the view that perceptual experiences and some other mental states have a particular kind of content: nonconceptual content. In this article I want to object to one of the arguments he provides. This is not because I side with McDowell in the ongoing debate about nonconceptual content. On the contrary, my views seem to me closer to Peacocke's, and have been strongly influenced by him. It is just that I am not convinced by the particular argument I will be questioning here. The explanatory task is a formidable one. At least some first-person self-ascriptions, particularly those resulting from introspection, prove so puzzling because they seem different in kind from others, first person or otherwise. Adding to that the question of whether such self-

---

<sup>1</sup> My work has benefited from discussions of Peacocke's paper with members of a LOGOS discussion group, particularly with Jose Díez and Dan López de Sa. The paper was given at a SADAF conference in Buenos Aires, November 2003; I thank the audience for helpful comments, in particular Eleonora Orlando, Eduardo Rivera and Ernest Sosa. Thanks also to an anonymous referee for the *European Review of Philosophy*. Financial support was provided in the framework of the European Science Foundation EUROCORES programme "The Origin of Man, Language and Languages" by the Spanish Government's grant MCYT BFF2002-10164 and research project HUM2004-05609-C02-01, and by a Distinció de Recerca de la Generalitat, Investigadors Reconeputs 2002-2008, DURSI, Generalitat de Catalunya.

ascriptions can be tokened by creatures lacking concepts ostensibly introduces a further gap that any acceptable account must bridge.

I cautiously condition my joining Peacocke's side of the debate because of a fundamental problem I have in this area: I do not feel that the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content has been made perspicuous, so that it is difficult to see what the disagreement is really about. Contents are sometimes characterized as nonconceptual if subjects might entertain them even if they do not possess the concepts belonging to a privileged theory that defines them. This view derives the distinction from a previous relational notion of *nonconceptual content relative to theory T* (by itself useless, for every content is nonconceptual, in that sense, relatively to some theory), by selecting a theory as privileged in relevant respects. The problem with this is that it is then difficult to see why paradigm cases of states whose content should count as conceptual in this debate (say, judgments of experts no more self-reflective than ordinary human beings, on matters straightforwardly in their field of expertise) will end up being such. For there is no reason to expect that ordinary human beings possess the concepts devised by the relevant privileged theory of contents to characterize their mental states, including the indicated judgments.

Peacocke's own proposal in the paper I will be considering further illustrates the difficulty. He says:

I shall be taking it that conceptual content is content of a kind that can be the content of judgment and belief. Concepts are constituents of those intentional contents which can be the complete, truth-evaluable, contents of judgment and belief" (op. cit., 243).

The problem with this suggestion is the complement of the one just raised for the previous one: unless specific constraints specify which states can properly count as judgments and beliefs, the proposal will trivialize the debate by making conceptual the content of perceptual experiences. This will be so if judgment and belief (together with their contents) are accounted for along behaviorist lines, or their nowadays more popular but similarly reductive functional (or functional-cum-teleological), information-theoretical proposals. I take it that what Peacocke says right after the preceding quotation is a move in the direction of preempting the disappointing denouement which his proposal, together with views like those just mentioned, would otherwise ensure:

Conceptual content and concepts I take to have identities conforming to, indeed answerable to, Gottlob Frege's criterion of identity for senses. Complete contents *p* and *q* are distinct if and only if it is possible for someone for whom the question arises rationally to judge that *p* without judging that *q*, and even while judging that not-*q*. (ibid).



I believe that this move accounts in part for Peacocke's motivation to endorse the argument I will be objecting to in this paper.<sup>2</sup> My criticism will later make it clear why I do not think that this suggestion really helps Peacocke's proposal to properly trace the conceptual/nonconceptual divide: unless further, question-begging constraints are put on what counts as *rationaly judging a content without judging another*, contents of perceptual experiences also have identities answerable to Frege's criterion.

It will help locate the rationale for the objections in its wider context, if I outline my own way of characterizing the distinction between the two kinds of contents. For reasons of space and focus, a rather dogmatic sketch is all I will provide here. Following Dummett (1973), I think of judgments as internal forms of the linguistic act of assertion, and beliefs as dispositional states whose manifestations are judgments so understood. Like other participants in the debate, I take judgments and beliefs to satisfy some form of Compositionality such as Evans' (1982) *Generality Constraint*, although, unlike others like Heck (2000), I do not think this by itself distinguishes conceptual from nonconceptual contents. As I will explain, I think that contents of perceptual experiences also satisfy some such constraint, if sufficiently vaguely articulated. Concepts are the structured constituents of judgeable contents, and therefore, under the Dummettian proposal, I take their identities to include, as a matter of fact, linguistic items, like auditory images of linguistic sounds, which would allow for the expression of judgments of which the concepts are constituents, should the need arise to do so. If we further think (with Brandom (1994) and Williamson (2000), putting aside their differences) of assertions as individuated by knowledge-related norms, this will lead us to see prototypical concept-involving states as committing their subjects to be in a position to justify them if the question arises, and to invoke them in providing justifications for other states. The view that judgments and beliefs are linguistically constituted is not a necessary ingredient of this proposal; the Dummettian linguistic characterization of judgments and beliefs is here taken to be merely reference-fixing, leaving open whether an account of their constitutive essence will allow for judgments and beliefs in speechless subjects. It is just that, as we conceive of them, paradigm cases of what we take to be conceptual contents are actually linguistically expressible.

This conception of conceptual contents is in agreement with most of what McDowell (1994) says about them, including their location in Sellars' "space of reasons". Thus, McDowell (1994, ch. 3) deals with Evans' (1982)

---

<sup>2</sup> Peacocke (1989), however, advances other arguments to the effect that nonconceptual contents do not satisfy the Fregean identity criterion.

“fineness of grain” argument for the nonconceptual character of the content of perceptual experience by providing his well-known analysis of the contents of perceptual experiences by means of demonstratives. This maneuver is readily intelligible if the conceptual/nonconceptual divide is understood as here suggested. Assuming this proposal as a constraint on what (at least prototypically in the actual world) counts as judgments and beliefs, we can now appeal to Peacocke’s own characterization of the conceptual/nonconceptual divide, without incurring in the difficulty I mentioned for Peacocke’s.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, we can now move to describe the real disagreement between Peacocke and McDowell, which is in my view epistemological, confronting epistemologists who share an internalist approach to justification. *Internalism* is here understood the way it is in epistemology, not in the philosophy of language, as the thesis that whether one is justified in believing *p* supervenes on facts which one is in a position to know by reflection alone, where *reflection* encompasses introspective awareness of one’s mental states, *a priori* reasoning, and memory of knowledge acquired in those ways.<sup>4</sup> Philosophers who, like myself, side with Peacocke, contend that the contents of perceptual experiences differ from the contents of any judgment or belief, understood as previously suggested. This is compatible with the fact that those experiences are capable of providing full-fledged internalist justification for judgments or beliefs. This is what Pryor (2000) calls ‘dogmatism’.<sup>5</sup> It is the view that perceptual beliefs are justified by *the fact* that the subject has relevantly related perceptual experiences, rather than by any inferential derivation from any other beliefs, including introspective beliefs about the presence and nature of the relevant perceptual experiences.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The proposal would be unwelcome to Peacocke, I take it: “that a concept user must have a language on which he can express some of his concepts [...] is a substantive, nondefinitional thesis that needs to be established”, *op. cit.*, 243. But I am not sure of this; notice that, in my proposal, the connection between concepts and language is definitional, like the connection between water and being colorless, although, as in the latter case, it may be substantive: the connection leaves open whether it is metaphysically possible that there is thought without language.

<sup>4</sup> I take this from what Pryor (2001, 104) calls ‘simple internalism’.

<sup>5</sup> Although I cannot elaborate on this here, the version of dogmatism I would like to defend deviates from Pryor’s. Firstly, unlike Pryor, I think it is only appropriate to apply dogmatism to perceptual judgments involving observable properties, for reasons close to Peacocke’s (2004a, 65-73). Also, like Peacocke I would defend dogmatism on the basis of considerations having to do with the identity conditions of concepts and the nature of *a priori* knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> The general principle endorsing the transition from experience to judgment as justificational, in the particular case of perception, is, I think, Burge’s (1993, 469) *Acceptance Principle*: “A person is *a priori* entitled to accept a proposition that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so, because it is *prima facie* preserved (received) from a rational source, or resource for reason; reliance on rational

This is a form of internalism. Indeed, only facts relevantly accessible to the subject count for the justification of his beliefs, rather than facts about, say, reliable connections between the experiences and states of affairs they represent only empirically. It is also a form of what Pryor (2001) calls ‘modest foundationalism’, because it posits justificational basic beliefs (beliefs that are not inferentially justified by other beliefs), while allowing for the fallibility and corrigibility of those basic beliefs. Heck (2000, 518-9) provides a compelling defense of the nonconceptualist view – understood along what I take to be the preceding lines – from McDowell’s considerations.

The nonconceptual contents of perceptual experiences are full-fledged constituents of states of conscious awareness of their subjects, since they are to supply internalist justification. Therefore, a reflective subject, armed with the needed conceptual tools (including linguistic resources) can conceptualize them, so that they become judgeable contents. But these are not the contents of the relevant experiences, which are the ones providing the fundamental justification for perceptual beliefs. Beliefs about perceptual experiences can allow the conceptually sophisticated thinker to articulate justifications for his perceptual beliefs of a better quality than that provided by the experiences themselves. However, the nonconceptualist holds that their presence provides by itself justification enough for knowledge. Indeed, animals and infants can in principle enjoy perceptual experiences identical to ours.

In my view, perceptual experiences are analogous to the states constituting the understanding that ordinary speakers have of the compositional building blocks (lexical units and meaningful elements of syntax) of their native languages – including their understanding of logical expressions. Following Peacocke again, I take this understanding to consist in finding certain transitions (*i.e.* multi-propositional intentional acts) primitively compelling in virtue of their form.<sup>7</sup> I think beliefs justified by states involving nonconceptual content (*states of pre-judgmental awareness*, as I prefer to call them) are close to at least some of the *primitive certainties* discussed by Wittgenstein (1969), and earlier by Ortega (1940).<sup>8</sup> Unlike judgments (including the judgments that conceptualize them), they may justify without

---

resources—or resources for reason—is, other things equal, necessary to the function of reason”.

<sup>7</sup> Peacocke might concur: regarding the relevant form, he says: “I think that some appreciation of this form is also psychologically real. When one makes an inference of this sort, one is aware of the form, even if nonconceptually so” (2004b, 97).

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Mulligan indicated to me the similitude between Ortega’s and Wittgenstein’s views here. I thank him for allowing me to see his manuscript “Certainty, Soil and Sediment”, where he elaborates on this and presents the similarly related views of other less well-known philosophers.

requiring justification, while being at the personal level and having internalist rationalizing potential.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, a crucial aspect of the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual contents lies in the role that the latter play as primitive presuppositions for the former.<sup>10</sup>

I now move to present the argument by Peacocke that I intend to rebut. Perceptual experiences have contents, at least in the minimal sense that they have correctness conditions, which may or may not be satisfied by the actual world around the would-be perceiver. As Heck (2000, 508-9) correctly insists, they also have at least an ingredient of force, the mind-to-world direction of fit characteristic of judgments and assertions, which Heck calls its ‘presentational’ aspect. (I will come back to this important issue by the end of the article.) Clearly, the contents of experiences are about the distribution of quality-instances in their environment. Peacocke argues, and I agree, that they involve not just these qualities, but the ways in which qualities and their instances may be perceived. The argument I will be objecting to is intended to distinguish these ways for observable qualities and their exemplifications to be perceived from Fregean senses. I suspect that Peacocke thinks (wrongly, in my view) that it is important to sustain his claim that contents of perceptual experiences are nonconceptual, in spite of their being as fine-grained as Fregean contents of judgments. If I am right, his idea would be that, even though both conceptual and nonconceptual contents constitute fine-grained correctness conditions, only the former are Fregean thoughts consisting of Fregean senses.<sup>11</sup>

In order to conclude that ways are not Fregean senses, Peacocke relies on a Dummettian premise that I am willing to grant, that a Fregean sense, including senses of perceptual demonstratives “can be individuated by the condition for it to refer to a given object or property” (*op. cit.*, 248). The argument then proceeds by attempting to establish that, unlike senses, ways for quality-instances to be perceived cannot be regarded “as individuated by the condition for them to refer to some object or property” (*ibid.*).

Although a way contributes to a correctness condition, it is important that which object is presented in a given way is not simply a matter of the object’s fitting that way. A distant aircraft in the sky may be presented as being in a certain direction. It may not in fact be in that direction, because the light rays are passing through refracting bodies of differentially heated air. When an object is presented in a given way in

---

<sup>9</sup> This is just an analogy; unlike experiences, many such “primitive certainties” remain tacit, perhaps essentially so.

<sup>10</sup> My proposal is thus close to Luntley’s (2003).

<sup>11</sup> As I acknowledged before, though, Peacocke (1989) presents further arguments that nonconceptual contents do not satisfy the Fregean identity criterion.

perception, which object is presented in that way is at least partly a matter of causation, as H. P. Grice argued (*ibid.*)

The argument can be construed as follows:

1. Fregean senses are individuated by the conditions for contentful states to refer to a given object or property.
2. For a perceptual experience  $e$  involving a way  $W$  for an instance of a quality to be perceived to present an object  $o$ ,  $o$  must play a salient causal role in the origination of  $e$ .
3. In some cases, an object  $o$  that an experience  $e$  is about may play a salient causal role in the origination of  $e$ , even if  $o$  does not satisfy the condition  $W$  constituting the way  $o$  is perceived in  $e$ .
4. Therefore, ways are not senses.

As I said, I accept premise (1), and I agree with Peacocke that Grice's (1961) considerations in support of the causal theory of perception validate premise (2). However, I want to resist premise (3). To see how I propose to do that, let us examine in more detail the example by means of which Peacocke defends it. In order to do that, I will introduce *conceptualizations* of ways of perceiving objects. These conceptualizations should of course not be confused with the ways themselves, which, unlike them, are constituents of nonconceptual contents; but there is no other way for us to discuss them intelligibly than through conceptualizations.<sup>12</sup>

We can imagine having an experience of the kind Peacocke describes, and introducing while attending to its relevant elements the following complex demonstrative  $D$ : *this (instance of this) aircraft-shape in this (instance of this) direction (centered around such-and-such bodily axes)*. (Aircraft-shaped instances and not aircrafts will be the intended objects in my reconstruction, on the assumption that the primary objects of perceptual experiences are instances of observable properties; but nothing important for the argument hinges on this, I think.) I assume that in the kind of cases Peacocke has in mind, illustrated by his example, something like this complex demonstrative conceptualizes what he takes to be the relevant way  $W$ . Now,

---

<sup>12</sup> Heck (2000, 519-20) remarks on how on his view, to which as I said earlier mine is in the relevant respects very close, the very linguistic articulation of the reasons that our perceptual experiences provide for our perceptual beliefs is of necessity unfaithful to their contents.

in the situation described, *D* lacks reference.<sup>13</sup> However, the experience does present an object. The object that the experience is about, therefore, is not determined by its fitting *W*, but in some other way, and causation is the most sensible candidate for that role.

In my view, however, the problem lies exclusively with a too simplistic characterization of what is the relevant way *W* for (an exemplification of) a quality to be perceived. Philosophers of perception have frequently noted that observable qualities belong in qualitative spaces: classes of qualities of the same type, held together by different observable relations. Those relations are geometrical, in the case of qualities like shapes or directions; relations of saturation, brightness and hue in the case of colors; relations of pitch and intensity in the case of sounds, and so on. In my view, this is not a contingent fact, but a fact constitutive of the very identity of the observable qualities at stake.<sup>14</sup> The capacity we have for perceptually recognizing instances of those qualities is constitutively linked to our capacity for distinguishing them from others in the same range, and for placing them in their proper qualitative spaces relative to others. Now, cases like the one considered by Peacocke are prototypical illusions. What distinguishes them from the other kind of prototypical perceptual mistake, hallucinations? The intuitive difference lies of course in that illusions, but not hallucinations, have objects; but how should we capture this intuition?

Note to begin with that the proper ontological kind to which objects of perception (those “instances” and “exemplifications” of observable qualities we have been speaking about so far) belong is that of *eventualities*; I use this term to cover more specific kinds, like states, events and processes. Perceptual experiences constitute sensory impressions of eventualities, in which different observable qualities (temporal, spatial, chromatic, auditory, noxious, etc.) are exemplified. Both in illusions and in hallucinations, no eventuality is causally responsible for instantiating the subject’s sensory impression. In the case of illusions, however, as opposed to hallucinations, there is an eventuality instantiating qualities in the same qualitative spaces as those of which the experience gives its subject a sensory impression. This eventuality does not merely cause the experience, but also, in addition, a kind of more complex causal dependence of the experience on the eventuality. Indeed, the orderly alterations of the observable qualities actually instantiated in the eventuality, along the specific relational dimensions constituting their respective qualitative spaces, would cause sensory impressions of

---

<sup>13</sup> On a view of complex demonstratives such as that in Larson & Segal (1996, sec. 6.4), a demonstrative *that F* may have a semantic referent, even if it does not satisfy *F*. I am assuming a contrary view, such as the one elaborated in García-Carpintero (2000).

<sup>14</sup> García-Carpintero (2002a) develops this view; see also the references there.

qualities altered in corresponding ways. In fact, there is an eventuality on which the experience is causally dependent: illusions have objects. In the case of hallucinations there is no such eventuality, and thus no objects.

I will call ‘causal influence’ this more complex form of causal dependence, borrowing the term from Lewis (2000), for it can be seen as a particular instance of a new condition that, under that name, Lewis thinks is needed for a proper definition of causation. Lewis says that *E* is causally dependent on *C* if and only if *C* influences *E*, and *C* influences *E* if and only if “[...] there is a substantial range  $C_1, C_2 \dots$  of different not-too-distant alterations of *C* (including the actual alteration of *C*) and there is a range  $E_1, E_2 \dots$  of alterations of *E*, at least some of which differ, such that if  $C_1$  had occurred,  $E_1$  would have occurred, and if  $C_2$  had occurred,  $E_2$  would have occurred, and so on” (*op. cit.*, 190). The details of Lewis’ definition of an *alteration* of an event *E* need not concern us here. Moreover, I would like to emphasize that, while Lewis reductively defines causation in terms of counterfactual dependence, I do not think that either his definition or any other could succeed. I have consequently simply used causation as a primitive relation in my own formulation of the specific form of causal influence that I need.

Using our recently introduced talk of eventualities, the complex demonstrative *D* by means of which I proposed earlier to conceptualize what appears to be Peacocke’s idea of the way *W* in his example reads: *that eventuality consisting of this (instance of this) aircraft-shape being in this (instance of this) direction (centered around such-and-such bodily axes)*. The preceding considerations suggest a different complex demonstrative properly to conceptualize *W*, *D'*: *that eventuality consisting of an (instance of) a shape properly related in its specific qualitative space to this (instance of this) aircraft-shape, in an (instance of) direction properly related in its qualitative space to this (instance of this) direction (centered around such-and-such bodily axes), which causally influences this experience*. In non-illusory cases, the shape and direction actually instantiated by the eventuality which *D'*, and thus *W*, is about are the very same that the subject experiences. In illusory cases, as in Peacocke’s example, some of them are not the same (for all he says about the example, the shape may be the same, even if the direction is not); however, even in illusory cases, *D'*, unlike *D*, is still determined as the referent, in that the eventuality *fits* the demonstrative, and therefore the way *W* that it conceptualizes. What Peacocke takes to be the way is but part of what it really is, according to this proposal. In addition, the experience itself is self-referentially involved, and so is the relation of causal influence.

I will consider presently an immediate objection to this proposal, which derives from this feature, that the way *W* is both self-referring (as it refers to the experience whose content contributes to specify itself) and causation referring. The proposal shares both features with Searle's (1983) well-known account of the content of perceptual experiences, and thus it also shares its problems. But let me elaborate first on what in my view is its main advantage over Peacocke's, which can be summed up like this: in my view, that in virtue of which the experience is correct or incorrect (illusory or hallucinatory) is an intrinsic part of an experience (a part of its content), while in Peacocke's own proposal it is a mere extrinsic part.

To explain what I have in mind here, let me use an analogy. According to Kaplan's (1989) well-known theory of indexicals and demonstratives, their *character*, and by extension the character of sentences in which they appear, is a property of types; thus, any two utterances of 'I am hungry' have the same character. Now, consider a view according to which the only intrinsic or essential semantic property of an utterance is its character. On such a view, the truth-conditions of an utterance would not be an intrinsic semantic aspect of the utterance; two utterances of 'I am hungry', with the same character, might have different truth-values, and therefore different truth-conditions. The truth-conditions of an utterance would depend in part on its intrinsic semantic properties, but in part also on semantically extrinsic properties. Correspondingly, the fact that an utterance of 'I am hungry' entails that someone is hungry (whenever the truth-conditions of the utterance are satisfied, the proposition that someone is hungry is true) and therefore justifies the judgment that someone is hungry, would not be just a matter of the intrinsic semantic properties of the utterance, but, in part, a matter of extrinsic properties. Compare the situation on an alternative, token-reflexive view according to which indexical utterances have, as their only intrinsic semantic property, a token-reflexive meaning, so that, for an utterance of 'I am hungry' including a token of 'I', its content would be that the utterer of that token is hungry.<sup>15</sup> This view is, to that extent, in a position to count the truth-condition of the utterance as a purely intrinsic matter, and, likewise, the entailment by the utterance of the proposition that someone is hungry, and thus its suitability to justify a judgment of the latter proposition.

Consider now a subject who judges in the situation that someone is hungry, on the basis that someone has uttered in his presence 'I am hungry'. Suppose, for the sake of the analogy, that the only relevant piece of justification the subject has for his judgment is a rational intuition as to the intrinsic semantic properties of the utterance he has witnessed, in the under-

---

<sup>15</sup> García-Carpintero (1998) develops and defends such a theory.



standing that a rational intuition is a conscious state which plays, in cases like this one, an epistemological role similar to the one of experiences vis-à-vis perceptual judgments on a “dogmatist” view like the one advanced by Pryor (2000), articulated by Burge’s (1993) *Acceptance Principle*. Under these assumptions, the Reichenbachian view is closer than the Kaplanian one to the epistemological internalism we are assuming.

The same contrast emerges when we compare Peacocke’s theory of the intrinsic semantic properties of perceptual experiences to the one advanced here, to the latter’s advantage. Consider someone in a situation like the one described in Peacocke’s example, but for the fact that the situation is not illusory: he is correctly seeing the position of the airplane. On Peacocke’s view, the experiences of both subjects have exactly the same content. Therefore, whether or not an experience is correct does not just depend on its semantic intrinsic properties, but on extrinsic properties in addition. Correspondingly, the fittingness of an experience to justify perceptual beliefs does not depend on its intrinsic semantic properties alone, but also on additional extrinsic facts. In the present proposal, and thanks to the sort of token-reflexive character that it ascribes to the content of experiences (the particular experience itself is self-referentially part of its content), the correctness-condition of an experience, and its suitability to justify corresponding perceptual beliefs, can be taken to be its intrinsic semantic properties.<sup>16</sup> This supports the present proposal, assuming the internalist epistemological stance we are taking for granted here. On internalist assumptions, the correctness-conditions of an experience, in virtue of which it is veridical or illusory, and in virtue of which it is apt to justify perceptual judgments, should be its main essential property.

I will conclude by discussing briefly the aforementioned objection to the present proposal, that it over-intellectualizes the content of experiences.<sup>17</sup> My defense depends crucially on my own way of understanding the conceptual/nonconceptual divide, outlined at the outset. It is not part of my view that full-fledged rational, adult human beings share states with nonconceptual content with infants and animals, in general. A paradigm case of those

---

<sup>16</sup> I emphasize the ‘can’; I am only claiming here that the present view is in a better position than Peacocke’s to take the correctness-condition of the experience as intrinsic semantic properties. Much more is required to defend that they are, given the modal (essential) nature of intrinsicness. Epistemologically important issues on the vicinity of the disjunctivism-conjunctivism debate, which I cannot properly tackle here, lurk behind this.

<sup>17</sup> Burge (1991) and McDowell (1991) make objections like this to Searle’s (1983) analogous proposal. García-Carpintero (1999), in spite of several criticisms of Searle’s self-understanding of his own proposal, gives a reply on behalf of it, on which what follows elaborates.

states are those “primitive certainties” on the truth-preserving character of inferential transitions constituting the fundamental logical knowledge of a normal adult, like clear-cut instances of *modus ponens*. What makes those ‘states of *pre-judgmental awareness*’ nonconceptual, as I prefer to call them, is the fact that subjects enjoy them even if they lack the concepts needed to think about them and critically evaluate their justificatory standing. My claim is that the contents of the experiences of full-fledged rational beings are nonconceptual in that sense. Their contents should for that purpose be understood as having the token-reflexive character I have ascribed to them. (I am not concerned here with characterizing the contents of the experiences of animals or infants.)

A reason in favor of the present proposal is that it provides the best account of what Heck (2000) calls the ‘presentational’ aspect of experiences, the peculiar way in which their force possesses the mind-to-world direction of fit characteristic of judgments and assertions. Following Anscombe’s (1957) original introduction of the idea, the distinction between two directions of fit is usually made in an intuitive way. Comparing a list used by a man going shopping to the same list, used by a detective tailing the man and listing his purchases, Anscombe writes on what distinguishes the two lists: “It is precisely this: if the list and the things the man actually buys do not agree, and if this and this alone constitutes a *mistake*, then the mistake is not in the list but in the man’s performance [...] whereas if the detective’s record and what the man actually buys do not agree, then the mistake is in the record.” (Anscombe, 1957, p. 56.) Intuitively, states with the mind-to-world direction of fit like assertions and beliefs ought to be changed to fit the world, and not vice versa, while the world should be changed to fit states with the world-to-mind direction of fit, like requests and desires, not vice versa.

In general, the asymmetry cannot be correctly characterized further in causal or temporal terms, by saying, for instance, that the fact that the content of a desire is not realized in the world is not yet a failing in the desire, and not yet any reason to discard the desire. Because the same could be said about some beliefs: beliefs ordinarily have future contents, so that the fact that their content is not yet realized in the world is not a failing in the belief. In general, the most that can be said is, I think, something like this: in normatively ideal circumstances, the occurrence of a doxastic state depends on the occurrence of its content, but not the other way around, while the occurrence of a conative state depends on the occurrence of the conative state, but not the other way around. To further theoretically characterize the distinction, we should go deeper into the nature of the ontological dependence, something here out of the question. However, it is sensible to think that properly constituted cases of perceptual beliefs depend on the truth-

makers of their true propositional contents, in that they are caused by, and thus formed later than, those truth-makers. (Perhaps in correspondingly fundamental cases, properly constituted desires cause their fulfilled propositional contents and are thus formed earlier than them.) The present account of the contents of perceptual experiences captures this intuition, in the simplest possible way, and is therefore to that extent validated by it.

In order to do this, contents of perceptual experiences include on this view a reference to causation, and also of course to the two terms of this relation; it must therefore refer to the experience itself, and to some of its intrinsic properties. As a result, the present proposal is a version of a sense-datum theory of perception. Let me use a traditional simile in this context to make this tenet of the present view palatable. To understand linguistic utterances, subjects must not just be aware of their contents, but also of the linguistic vehicles that convey them; however, they are typically oblivious to the latter, because their attention is typically occupied only with the former. On the present view, in understanding perceptual experiences, subjects are not merely aware of an external situation, characterized in terms of observable properties; but also of the properties of the experience itself that are the meaning-vehicles in this case. Subjects are, however, typically unaware of the latter; this is what is nowadays called the “diaphanousness” of experiences in fact amounts to.<sup>18</sup> This does not contradict the present view; it is to be explained in analogous terms to the linguistic case, compounded with the fact that the relation between meaning-vehicle and content is in the perceptual case not conventional, as it is in the linguistic case, but iconic. Many theorists will of course reject this claim, distinctive of sense-datum theories. I have defended it elsewhere, also on the traditional basis that it provides an optimal account of the relation between veridical experiences, illusions and hallucinations.<sup>19</sup> Here I only need to show that it is a sensible account, to dispose of the present objection that the proposal over-intellectualizes the contents of experiences. We have intuitions that perceptual experiences have a “presentational” character, in that they present for us an objective, independently existing situation. We also have intuitions that there are important commonalities between illusions and hallucinations, on the one hand, and corresponding veridical experiences, on the other. On the present view, these sets of intuitions manifest what the proposal elaborated

---

<sup>18</sup> I am aware that this understanding of the transparency of experiences is very controversial, for reasons analogous to those concerning the previous proposal about their intrinsic contents, see fn. 15; I lack the space to properly defend it here.

<sup>19</sup> See García-Carpintero (2002b).

here makes explicit, or conceptualizes: the nonconceptual contents of experiences of which we have a pre-judgmental awareness.

## References

- Anscombe, G.E.M. 1957. *Intention*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Brandom, R. 1994. *Making it Explicit*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P.
- Burge, T. 1991. Vision and Intentional Content. *John Searle and His Critics*, ed. E. LePore & R. van Gulick, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Burge, T. 1993. Content Preservation. *Philosophical Review*, 102, 457-488.
- Dummett, M. 1973. *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. 2nd. edition, 1981, London: Duckworth.
- Evans, G. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- García-Carpintero, M. 1998. Indexicals as Token-Reflexives, *Mind*, 107: 529-563.
- García-Carpintero, M. 1999. Searle on Perception. *Teorema*, 18/1: 19-41.
- García-Carpintero, M. 2002a. Sense-data: the Sensible Approach. *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 62: 17-63.
- García-Carpintero, M. 2002b. A Vindication of Sense-Data. *Argument und Analyse*, ed. U. Moulines & K. Niebergall, Paderborn: Mentis Verlag, 203-224.
- Grice, H. P. 1961. The Causal Theory of Perception, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 35.
- Heck, Richard G. Jnr. 2000. Nonconceptual Content and the 'Space of Reasons'. *Philosophical Review*, 109: 483-523.
- Kaplan, D. 1989. Demonstratives. *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 481-563.
- Larson, R. and Segal, G. 1996. *Knowledge of meaning: Semantic value and Logical Form*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Lewis, D. 2000. Causation as Influence, *Journal of Philosophy*, XCVII: 182-197.
- Luntley, M. 2003. Non-conceptual Content and the Sound of Music. *Mind and Language*, 18: 402-426.
- McDowell, J. 1991. Intentionality De Re. *Searle and His Critics*, ed. E. LePore & R. van Gulick, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- McDowell, J. 1994. *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Ortega y Gasset, J. 1940. Ideas y Creencias. *Obras Completas*, vol. 5, Madrid: Alianza, 1994, 381-409.
- Peacocke, C. 1989. Perceptual Content. *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 297-329.

- Peacocke, C. 2001. Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content? *Journal of Philosophy*, XCVIII: 239-264.
- Peacocke, C. 2004a. *The Realm of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peacocke, C. 2004b. Interrelations: Concepts, Knowledge, Reference and Structure. *Mind and Language*, 19: 85-98.
- Pryor, J. 2000. The Skeptic and the Dogmatist. *Noûs*: 34, 517-549.
- Pryor, J. 2001. Highlights of Recent Epistemology. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 52: 95-124.
- Searle, J. 1983. *Intentionality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williamson, T. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1969. *On Certainty*. English translation by D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

*Manuel García-Carpintero*

*Departament de Lògica, Història i Filosofia de la Ciència*

*Universitat de Barcelona*

*Baldiri i Reixac, s.n. Edifici "Les Cúpules," torre C, 5è pis*

*08028 Barcelona – Spain*

*[garcia@mat.ub.es](mailto:garcia@mat.ub.es)*



# Why Nonconceptual Content Cannot Be Immune to Error through Misidentification

ROBLIN MEEKS

## 1 Introduction

Most traditional accounts of self-consciousness focus almost exclusively on the peculiarities of the first-person pronoun and its mental analog. According to these accounts, to be self-conscious is to possess the fairly advanced cognitive ability to self-ascribe properties employing a first-person concept, ascriptions canonically expressed with 'I'. But do creatures lacking linguistic abilities thereby lack self-consciousness? After all, when hungry, even lobsters are self-possessed enough to avoid eating themselves. And what of prelinguistic infants? If they eventually entertain and express thoughts involving a first-person concept, how does self-consciousness in its form most familiar to us arise out of their wordless beginnings?

The explanatory task is a formidable one. At least some first-person self-ascriptions, particularly those resulting from introspection, prove so puzzling because they seem different in kind from others, first person or otherwise. Adding to that the question of whether such self-ascriptions can be tokened by creatures lacking concepts ostensibly introduces a further gap in kind that any acceptable account must bridge.

One way to address this problem and to dispel the mystery of self-consciousness and its development is to replace one of the gaps in kind with a scale of degree. One could, in other words, argue that certain non- and

prelinguistic creatures can in fact token states with nonconceptual content that nevertheless qualify as primitive forms of self-consciousness. We must then provide an understanding of how human psychology builds upon this primitive base, eventually coming to be shot through with the richer forms of self-consciousness exemplified by first-person self-ascriptions of psychological states and properties. This approach certainly still leaves a formidable explanatory problem, but one perhaps ultimately more tractable.

For this strategy to succeed, however, its proponents must provide plausible criteria that a state with nonconceptual content can satisfy to be considered self-conscious. One sensible approach to doing so is to hold both conceptual and nonconceptual states to largely the same theoretical standards. The challenge, therefore, lies in extending the applicability of the immunity condition to states with nonconceptual content.

In what follows I test the plausibility of this strategy by assessing José Luis Bermúdez's (1998) claim that certain forms of autonomous nonconceptual content—states with which a creature represents the world as being such-and-such a way despite that creature's possessing no conceptual resources whatsoever—do qualify as forms of genuine self-consciousness since, like certain states with first-person conceptual content, they are immune to error through misidentification. If one assumes, as Bermúdez does, that putatively self-conscious states with nonconceptual content represent the subjects that token them, we will find that no state can be nonconceptual, representational, and immune to error through misidentification. Insisting that states with nonconceptual content be immune to error of misidentification precludes them from being representational on structural grounds. Moreover, adopting a more minimalist strategy in which certain nonconceptual states concern their subjects rather than represent them runs counter to our growing understanding of the mirror mechanisms important to social cognition. Accordingly, we ultimately face a choice between rejecting immunity as a necessary condition for a state with nonconceptual content to be self-conscious and accepting that such states cannot in principle qualify as primitive forms of self-consciousness.

## **2 Types of Self-Referential Content**

We should be clear from the outset as to what we mean when we speak of a creature as self-conscious. In general, to be self-conscious, a creature must be capable of possessing self-representational states. We need to be more precise, however, for one represents oneself in thought and speech in a host of ostensibly distinct ways. I, for example, regularly believe myself to be hungry, five blocks from home, married, relatively tall, thinking that a cer-



tain philosophical puzzle is tenacious, and so on. I express many of these thoughts with speech acts involving the first-person pronoun; for others I appeal to various alternative self-designating expressions such as my proper name, an appropriate definite description, or a demonstrative phrase.

At least some first-person thoughts seem importantly unlike other contents that represent the subject that tokens them. Consider the following thoughts:

- (1) I am the winner of the New York Lottery.
- (2) RM is the winner of the New York Lottery.

Intuitively it seems that (2) permits the possibility of self-misidentification whereas (1) does not. I can rationally believe (2) while denying that I myself am the lottery winner. No such denial seems available to me with (1), however. In (1), I am thinking of myself nonaccidentally, perfectly aware to whom I am ascribing the property of lottery-winner, even if I have misread the numbers on my ticket and am actually no wealthier than before. In contrast, (2) leaves open the possibility that I am thinking of myself only accidentally; I do in fact ascribe a property to myself, but I might well deny that that is the case. Accordingly, we can glean from these examples that a subject can misidentify herself if for a given thought that she would normally express with some predicate F and some self-designating name, definite description, or demonstrative phrase a, that subject can rationally assent to “a is F” while denying that she, herself is a and is therefore not F.

Naturally, for me (1) and (2) could further differ radically in the amount of joy precipitated by their tokening. But the crucial distinction between the two illustrates a cardinal feature of self-consciousness: For a creature to be self-conscious it must be capable of possessing states that, like (1), have nonaccidental first-person content. Cases in which one accidentally self-ascribes a property or state seem to allow for a subject to misidentify herself; nonaccidental cases do not.

### **3 Immunity to Error Through Misidentification Relative to the First-Person Pronoun**

What accounts for the difference in identification between accidental and nonaccidental self-ascriptions? In *The Blue Book* Wittgenstein attempts an answer. He distinguishes between what he calls ‘I’ used as subject and ‘I’ used as object (1958, pp. 66-8). The latter, he claims, permits the possibility of misidentifying the user of the first-person pronoun, whereas the for-

mer does not.<sup>1</sup> When uttering “I am in pain”—the canonical instance of ‘I’ used as subject—the identification of the speaker does not seem to be in question: I cannot ascribe a felt pain to someone that, unbeknownst to me, is actually myself. In a genuinely self-conscious ascription of a property, it is no accident that I recognize that I am the subject of the ascription, for it could not be otherwise. In Wittgenstein’s memorable phrase: “The man who cries out with pain, or says that he has pain, *doesn’t choose the mouth which says it*” (1958, p. 68, emphasis his).

Sydney Shoemaker has done much work to elucidate and to extend this condition, labeling it with the now standard terminology “immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun” (1968, p. 556). For Shoemaker, roughly as for Wittgenstein,<sup>2</sup> in making certain self-ascriptions one cannot be wrong about whether the subject to which a property is ascribed is oneself. All others—those Wittgenstein would consider made with ‘I’ used as object as well as those involving self-designating expressions other than the first-person pronoun—allow for the possibility that the subject mistakes which individual possesses the property in question. He writes:

to say that a statement “*a* is \_” is subject to error through misidentification relative to the term ‘*a*’ means that the following is possible: the speaker knows some particular thing to be \_, but makes the mistake of asserting “*a* is \_” because, and only because, he mistakenly thinks that the thing he knows to be \_ is what ‘*a*’ refers to. (1968, p. 557)

Essentially, Shoemaker wants to capture Wittgenstein’s intuition that certain ways of thinking and speaking about oneself simply do not seem to allow room for questions to arise about who is doing the thinking or speaking. In thinking the thought I would normally express with the speech act “I am angry,” for example, it seems that I cannot in principle be mistaken about *who* exactly is angry, for in feeling angry I cannot find myself in the awkward position of knowing directly and immediately that someone is angry without knowing that it is *I* who is angry. Feeling angry seems inseparable from feeling *myself* to be angry.

Notice that the immunity condition does not exclude the possibility of a more familiar form of self-misidentification. I could, for example, come to

---

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Wittgenstein claims that ‘I’ in cases of its use as subject is not a referring or indicating expression at all. This position is endorsed and quite forcefully defended by Anscombe (1975). See below.

<sup>2</sup> Shoemaker (1968) basically imports Wittgenstein’s use as subject/use as object distinction with regard to ‘I’ except that he does hold that the first-person pronoun always functions as a referring expression. For Shoemaker, the distinction is not one of representation but instead due to the way in which one knows the property in question to be instantiated.

believe that I am Freud. If asked who I am, I respond that I am Freud, and I refuse to answer to anyone who does not address me by that name. I incessantly attempt to analyze the dreams of those around me, and I am quick to assert that *Civilization and Its Discontents* was some of my best work. Needless to say, I am not Freud. Self-reference with the first-person pronoun, however, survives such radical error about who one is. In this extreme case of misidentification my first-person expressions of false Freud beliefs such as “I invented psychoanalysis” say something false about me and not something true about the actual Freud. Moreover, I do intend my use of the first-person pronoun to refer to Freud, and when hear others speak of Freud I believe that they are speaking of me. I am wrong both about who I am and who exactly Freud is. Still, it seems that I cannot be wrong about who believes himself to be Freud, and the immunity condition is intended to capture this fundamental intuition.

Why think that at least some self-ascriptions must be immune to this type of misidentification? Shoemaker argues that “where the use of ‘I’ *does* involve an identification, the making of the identification will always presuppose the prior possession of other first-person information” (1996, p. 211). Accordingly, if self-ascribing properties always depended upon identifying something as oneself, we would fall into an infinite regress. To identify something as oneself, one has to first know at least some of the properties one possesses in order to determine whether that thing is oneself. If knowledge of these identifying properties themselves resulted from an identification-dependent process, one would need to have still prior knowledge of those properties used in that process, and so on. Identification must give out, it seems, before one’s ability to ascribe properties to oneself.<sup>3</sup>

Shoemaker characterizes this immunity in terms of what one knows about oneself, but this is a bit misleading. Such self-ascriptions do not enjoy freedom from error *tout court*. Shoemaker himself cautions that Wittgenstein’s distinction regarding the uses of ‘I’—and, accordingly, his distinction between self-ascriptions that are immune to error and those that are not—should not be confused with the corrigible/incorrigible distinction (1968, p. 556).<sup>4</sup> One can apparently be wrong about the property ascribed even when one cannot fall prey to error regarding the subject of the ascription. I could hear sounds in the distance and token the thought that I would

---

<sup>3</sup> I should note that while I take this to be the main argument he marshals in support of immunity, Shoemaker often writes as though it is simply a datum, or at least an entirely separable claim, that certain uses of ‘I’ are immune to misidentification. See, e.g., 1968, p. 561. And John Campbell (1999), for example, has recently remarked that “immunity to error through misidentification is a datum” useful for testing the viability of various theoretical approaches to the first person (p. 91).

<sup>4</sup> Presumably Shoemaker would also agree that immunity is not tantamount to infallibility.

express as “I hear a woodpecker” when in fact it was a series of gunshots. Though my belief is false, intuitively the conditions for immunity to misidentification are satisfied: my auditory experience of hearing the gunshots grounds my belief that someone heard a woodpecker, but those same grounds seem to leave no room for mistakes regarding which subject heard the noise. If one can indeed be mistaken about which property one instantiates—even if one cannot be mistaken about which person instantiates it—one cannot be properly said to possess knowledge.

Bermúdez likewise finds talk of knowledge *per se* ill suited to capture the special status of nonaccidental self-ascriptions that Shoemaker intends to regiment. He writes:

The category of first-person contents being picked out is not defined by its subject matter or by any points of grammar. What demarcates the class of judgments and beliefs that are immune to error through misidentification is the evidence base from which they are derived, or the information on which they are based.... (p. 6)

Ascriptions of pain to myself as well as to others employ the same predicate; immunity issues from the way in which I know a pain to be present. What matters is the connection between particular evidence bases that serve as sources of self-awareness and the representational states that those sources give rise to. Not all evidence bases support states that are immune to error of misidentification, and not all contents that are so immune are true.

Returning to our main theme, for a creature to be self-conscious in the familiar sense exemplified by (1) above, it must be capable of tokening states with nonaccidental first-person content in virtue of being immune to error through misidentification. This immunity condition is not a sufficient one for a state to be self-conscious, but it is usually considered necessary. Accordingly, can more cognitively primitive creatures such as non-linguistic animals and prelinguistic infants token states that capture the distinction between accidental and nonaccidental self-reference, or at least approximate the nonaccidental nature of (1)?

#### **4 Autonomous Nonconceptual Content**

Bermúdez contends that we have good reason to champion nonconceptual content in general and nonaccidental nonconceptual content in particular. He argues that establishing the existence of genuinely first-personal states with autonomous nonconceptual content disarms what he calls the paradox of self-consciousness. This paradox roughly amounts to the circularity that results from analyzing self-consciousness solely in terms of a subject’s mastery of the first-person pronoun. Such mastery requires that a subject knows—or at least believes—that she, herself is the tokener of the speech

act involving 'I'. But spelling out what it is for a subject to believe that "she, herself" is such-and-such involves reference to the type of thought that we want to explain.

Though one can dispute whether Bermúdez's concern achieves the status of paradox,<sup>5</sup> it remains an interesting question in its own right as to whether creatures lacking conceptual resources can be considered self-conscious and on what grounds. For ascribing content in general to creatures lacking linguistic abilities seems problematic—let alone puzzling ascriptions like (1). After all, we bring our own conceptual resources to bear in attributing states to others, and we can express such ascriptions using concepts that the subject to which the state is attributed may not possess. We speak of our pets as wanting to go out, for example, as being hungry, as chasing after Frisbees, etc. However, we might hesitate to impute to them concepts such as BACK YARD, DOG CHOW, and FRISBEE. Might we be mistaking how *we* pick out the content for the content picked out?

Bermúdez marks this important distinction—between the conceptual resources of ascriber and those of the subject of ascription—with a pair of principles. The first is what he calls the "Priority Principle", or the principle that conceptual abilities require linguistic abilities; therefore, creatures that lack linguistic abilities lack concepts (p. 42). He also introduces what he calls the "Conceptual Requirement Principle", which states that a creature's conceptual repertoire determines the contents it can possess (p. 41). Taken together, the two principles preclude non-linguistic creatures from possessing states with content at all.

We have good reason, Bermúdez argues, to deny the Conceptual Requirement Principle while retaining the Priority Principle. Attributing non-conceptual representational states to creatures lacking linguistic abilities makes sound theoretical sense. Certain intentional systems—including non-linguistic animals and prelinguistic infants—arguably lack concepts. Still, plausible explanations of the behavior of any intentional system seem to require ascribing representational states to it because no law-like relation holds between its sensory input and behavioral output. Differences in behavior when facing the same sensory input indicate that a creature's behavior is a function of a complex group of states, some of which differ from a previous occasion (a past predator can become prey, e.g.), or perhaps that it is misrepresenting a current state of the world or its body.

---

<sup>5</sup> It is not clear that we even must face circular reasoning. Perhaps a better way of casting the problem is in terms of nonaccidental self-reference, whether in thought or in language. This in effect denies that we have two disparate things—first-person thoughts and their expressions—that can be viciously interdefined.

Proponents of nonconceptual content also like to draw attention to the richness of perceptual experience.<sup>6</sup> One seems able to represent more properties than one can describe, and this suggests that the range of one's representational states exceeds one's conceptual repertoire.<sup>7</sup> I can discriminate two subtly differing shades of green when examining them side by side yet fail to distinguish them when they are presented in succession. And my thoughts about either shade prove severely limited in their absence. My perceptual experiences represent the two colors, but those representations cannot support inferences or participate in contents in the absence of the properties represented.

This last consideration points to an important difference between nonconceptual states and their conceptual complements. Though both types of state are representational, they differ in the way they interact with other states and, accordingly, the inferential abilities a creature must possess to token them. Though deep disagreement exists as to the nature of concepts, parties to the debate do generally agree that states with conceptual content consist of decomposable parts that can contribute to a host of thoughts projectible into contexts other than those in which the represented objects and properties appear.<sup>8</sup> To put it another way, conceptual content observes what Evans (1982) terms the "Generality Constraint":

If we hold that the subject's understanding of '*Fa*' and his understanding of '*Gb*' are structured, we are committed to the view that the subject will also be able to understand the sentences '*Fb*' and '*Ga*'. And we are committed, in addition, to holding that there is a common explanation for the subject's understanding of '*Fa*' and '*Ga*', and a common explanation for his understanding of '*Fa*' and '*Fb*'. (p. 101)

The cognitive abilities required to token states with conceptual content themselves enable the tokener to decompose and to generate new contents based upon her conceptual lexicon. Generality dictates, for example, that if one can entertain the conceptualized thoughts that elephants are large and that airplanes are shiny, one will *ipso facto* be able to think that airplanes are large and that elephants are shiny. One will also be equipped to draw

---

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Peacocke's argument that "an experience is not restricted in its range of possible contents to those points or ranges picked out by concepts ... possessed by the perceiver" (1992, p. 68).

<sup>7</sup> This is not universally accepted, however. See McDowell (1994).

<sup>8</sup> Peacocke (1992), for example, writes that "recombinability is about as general a phenomenon as one can hope to find in the realm of conceptual content. Any theory of conceptual content that aspires to generality must explain the phenomenon" (p. 41). Also cf. Fodor's (1998) arguments for the compositionality of content which take its systematicity and productivity as data for which any respectable theory of concepts must account.

related generalizations and inferences regardless of the proximity of elephants and airplanes.<sup>9</sup>

Broadly speaking, any state that supports generality will be conceptual. Accordingly, states with nonconceptual content, though representational, must then be holophrastic, lacking the necessary structural features to make them productive and systematic in a way that respects the Generality Constraint.

## 5 Nonconceptual Content and Immunity

Could states with nonconceptual content so understood qualify as primitive forms of self-consciousness? Bermúdez suggests that to be considered forms of primitive self-consciousness, they must meet the requirements for any representational state to be self-conscious—namely, they must have immediate implications for action, and they must be nonaccidentally about oneself (1998, pp. 147-8).<sup>10</sup> Skipping the former for present purposes, as we saw above, thoughts are nonaccidentally about oneself, Bermúdez and many others argue, because they are immune to error through misidentification.

Bermúdez's argument in favor of nonconceptual contents that are immune to this sort of error is relatively straightforward. Consider states resulting from somatic proprioception. One's proprioceptive system provides a stream of information regarding the state of one's body, including the position of limbs, skin and joint tension, vestibular feedback during motion, etc.<sup>11</sup> These are representational states because they, like any other representational state, are causally sensitive to sensory input and mediate behavioral output. Moreover, somatic proprioception does seem to provide the right kind of evidence base, for apparently it "cannot give rise to thoughts that are accidentally about oneself" (1998, p. 148). Bermúdez continues:

One of the distinctive features of somatic proprioception is that it is subserved by information channels that do not yield information about anybody's bodily properties except my own (just as introspection does not yield information about anybody's psychological properties ex-

---

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Hurley (1998).

<sup>10</sup> These two requirements are not universally recognized to be exhaustive. Brook (1994), for one, lists five features of self-consciousness that he believes any theory must address.

<sup>11</sup> For a more extensive list of the informational systems that constitute somatic proprioception, see the general introduction to Bermúdez, Marcel, and Eilan (1995), pp. 13-15. There they also distinguish between proprioceptive *information* and proprioceptive *awareness*. They characterize informational states as subpersonal and only states of awareness as representational in the way that interests us here. Accordingly, in talking of proprioception I mean representational states resulting from processing by the proprioceptive system.

cept my own). It follows from the simple fact that I somatically proprioceive particular bodily properties and introspect particular psychological properties that those bodily and psychological properties are my own. (1998, p. 149)

I cannot somatically proprioceive that *someone's* legs are crossed, for example, without thereby proprioceiving that *my* legs are crossed. And since somatic proprioception provides an evidence base for contents where the identification of the subject cannot be in doubt—even for creatures lacking any conceptual resources whatsoever—Bermúdez concludes that nonconceptual states of proprioceptive awareness are immune to error through misidentification and therefore qualify as genuine forms of self-consciousness.

Focusing just on the particular bodily properties reported on by proprioception, what are we to make of the claim that one cannot be mistaken about which body instantiates certain properties when one is aware of them via proprioception? This question is related to another. To qualify as representational—that is, to be considered contents at all—proprioceptive states must allow for the possibility of misrepresentation. Accordingly, we should ask: How can nonconceptual states funded by proprioception misrepresent?

States with conceptual content can, roughly speaking, “who” or “what” misrepresent—they can misrepresent the subject of the state (“who”) or the presence of a property (“what”), or presumably both.<sup>12</sup> Shoemaker’s definition of misidentification given above nicely illustrates the who-/what-misrepresentation distinction. One’s belief that *a* is *F* suffers from misidentification relative to the term ‘*a*’, Shoemaker claims, when one knows some particular thing to be *F* but errs in thinking that ‘*a*’ refers to that thing.<sup>13</sup> That is, one correctly believes that some thing is *F* but falsely believes that it is *a* that is *F*. I could erroneously take a reflection in a mirror to be mine and conclude on that basis that I am wearing a wrinkled shirt, for example. The shirt of the reflected person might indeed be wrinkled, but the reflection may not be my own. The falsity results from misrepresenting the subject despite correctly representing the instantiated property, and hence we have a case of who-misrepresentation without what-misrepresentation.

---

<sup>12</sup> I limit the discussion to singular thoughts to avoid peripheral complications. Relations can also be misrepresented, as can the objects related. However, given our preoccupation with immunity to error through misidentification, our primary interest lies in the possibilities for subject misrepresentation.

<sup>13</sup> Misidentification can also result from decomposing  $(\exists x)Fx$  to *Fa* directly without having a particular individual in mind. Pryor (1999) labels this mistake as one of *which object*-misidentification and those involving a belief about a particular object as *de re*-misidentification. My overall argument is amenable to either construal.



A state that is immune to error through misidentification cannot, obviously, who-misrepresent. Misidentification involves misrepresenting the subject of a state, and can be thought of as a guarantee against self-representational accidents. As we saw above, however, accidents of predication can still occur, which means that such states can nevertheless what-misrepresent. When I express my false belief that I have heard a woodpecker in the distance, I nevertheless succeed in representing myself as the subject of the belief and apparently could not fail to do so. And since states with conceptual content can both misrepresent and be immune to error of misidentification, no question arises as to their representational status.

Immunity for nonconceptual contents comes at a high price, however. For a state to be representational and immune to error of misidentification it must at least be possible for it to what-misrepresent without who-misrepresenting. To have what- without who-misrepresentation requires the subject to token a state that successfully represents that subject but erroneously ascribes a property to it. States with conceptual content have an internal structure that permits subject and predicate representations to succeed and to fail independently. But states with nonconceptual content lack the internal structure requisite for a distinction between what-misrepresentation and who-misrepresentation. For these states to misrepresent at all simply is for them to misidentify. And denying that nonconceptual states can who-misrepresent thus amounts to denying that representational errors of *any* sort are possible. Hence, endorsing immunity to error through misidentification at this primitive level precludes misrepresentation, which in turn serves to disqualify proprioceptive states—or any nonconceptual states purportedly so immune—from being representational.

Unlike those who discuss immunity to misidentification as it relates to judgments, it is not at all clear that proponents of nonaccidental nonconceptual content can relieve this tension. Evans, for example, does not fall into a similar predicament, for 'I'-thoughts as he regiments them possess a conceptual structure that localizes—as Shoemaker's condition in its long form indicates—the immunity to error through misidentification *relative to the first person pronoun*. Misrepresentation can still occur with regard to the predicate position and the ascription of bodily properties, and hence immunity to misidentification and misrepresentation can coexist in the same thought or judgment. Creatures lacking conceptual resources altogether, in contrast, do not have the first-person pronoun or its mental analogue at their disposal. Without conceptually structured thoughts, it seems that these types of subjects cannot possess contents that are both representational and immune to error through misidentification, for they have nothing that that immunity could be relative *to*.

Or do they? Bermúdez argues that inference to the best explanation warrants ascribing what he calls “protobeliefs”, or nonconceptual belief analogs, to non-language-using creatures requiring intentional explanations to account for their behavior (1998, pp. 117-119). As he presents them, perceptual protobeliefs<sup>14</sup> are nearly as rich as their conceptual correlates: they can embody “nonextensional modes of presentation” in terms of Gibsonian affordances (p. 121), and they are somewhat compositional, though they do not allow for the global recombining necessary to satisfy the Generality Constraint (p. 93). So structured, perceptual protobeliefs support primitive inference and the limited generation of further new nonconceptual contents from a set of others. Accordingly, perceptual protobeliefs so construed—including contents based on somatic proprioception—seem capable of supporting something like a discrete subject representation that could serve as the locus of immunity to error through misidentification as well as a predicative component that could misrepresent a property of the world or body.

One certainly becomes puzzled at this point, however. If nonconceptual contents based upon somatic proprioception can support both a component that guarantees immunity to errors of misidentification and a component vulnerable to misrepresentation, then what are we to make of the original motivation for maintaining a clear conceptual/nonconceptual distinction with regard to contents? Indeed, it seems that inference to the best explanation warrants thinking of the constituents of protobeliefs as “protoconcepts”. Much like concepts, protoconcepts could be defined in terms of their inferential role, where a protoconcept’s inferential role can be cashed out in terms of the protopositions or protobeliefs in which it participates. As the analogy deepens between concepts and protoconcepts, we have reason to conclude that creatures lacking language do possess conceptual abilities of some sort, however limited or nascent.

Bermúdez himself would no doubt resist this approach since it seems to run afoul of the Priority Principle. Priority was initially important because it “allows us to make a very clear distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual modes of content-bearing representation” (Bermúdez 1998, p. 43), and hence provides us with a means of explaining, for example, how conceptual forms of self-consciousness can arise over the course of normal human psychological maturation. Yet, given that protobeliefs are in some measure compositional and fund limited inference—indeed are constituted by protoconcepts—it is no longer clear how we can maintain a very clear dis-

---

<sup>14</sup> Bermúdez also briefly discusses instrumental protobeliefs (p. 118), but our discussion can safely ignore them. Bermúdez draws this bit of his theoretical apparatus from Peacocke (1992).

inction between conceptual and nonconceptual contents. The distinction quickly loses its explanatory force.

Still, perhaps the protoconcept/concept analogy runs fairly shallow, for even if non-language-using creatures possessed a range of protoconcepts defined in terms of protoconceptual roles, they do not have an explicit grasp of these roles. Such creatures are merely sensitive to the truth of inferential transitions. Bermúdez writes:

Certainly, it is possible to be justified (or warranted) in making a certain inferential transition without being able to provide a justification (or warrant) for that inferential transition. It is a familiar epistemological point, after all, that there is a difference between being justified in holding a belief and justifying that belief. What does not seem to be true is that one can be justified in making an inferential transition even if one is not capable of providing any justifications at all for any inferential transitions. But providing justifications is a paradigmatically linguistic activity. Providing justifications is a matter of identifying and articulating the reasons for a given classification, inference, or judgment. It is because prelinguistic creatures are in principle incapable of providing such justifications that the priority thesis is true. Mere sensitivity to the truth of inferential transitions involving a given concept is not enough for possession of that concept. Rational sensitivity is required, and rational sensitivity comes only with language mastery. (p. 71)

For Bermúdez, then, concept possession is a fairly advanced skill based upon an ability to identify and to provide reasons for beliefs, and limited inferential ability—even an ability to make inferences that one is justified in making—does not indicate concept possession.<sup>15</sup>

This seems a bit too stringent, however. Being able to give reasons as reasons is a function of possessing the concepts of justification, belief, and reason, among others. Imposing the further requirement on inferential ability that one recognizes that one is in fact giving reasons may disqualify attributing conceptual abilities where we normally would be comfortable doing so. To take an example Bermúdez himself gives (p. 70), the children in Susan Carey's (1982) experiments who concluded that a worm was more likely to have a spleen than a toy mechanical monkey are probably not in position to identify their reasons for this conclusion *as reasons* and to provide justification for their inferences *as justification*. Still, he wants to credit these four-year olds with possessing the concepts HUMAN BEING, LIVING ANIMAL, INTERNAL ORGANS, and the inferential relations between them.

---

<sup>15</sup> Hurley (1998) and Peacocke (1992) accept similar strong normative constraints on concept possession and deployment.

## 6 The Minimalist Approach

I have argued that for a state to be both representational and immune to error through misidentification it must be able to what-misrepresent without who-misrepresenting. For a state to be immune to error through misidentification as well as representational it must consist of conceptually structured content, for the immunity in question is *relative to* the representation of the subject. Conceptual content can satisfy the immunity condition since the structural features of a state that bring it into line with the Generality Constraint also underwrite its ability to be nonaccidentally about oneself. Accordingly, states with nonconceptual content cannot in principle satisfy this condition, regardless of evidence base. For a nonconceptual state to be immune to error of misidentification is for it to be totally immune to representational error, but with no possibility of misrepresentation, however, such states cannot be considered representational. Bermúdez does seem to attempt to make room for immunity by allowing for nonconceptual content to have internal structure similar to conceptual content, but this approach relies upon an overly sophisticated criterion of concept possession and risks undermining the explanatory power and motivation of drawing the conceptual/nonconceptual content distinction.

In characterizing nonconceptual content in terms rather similar to conceptual content, Bermúdez could be described as having a maximalist conception of this type of content. One could, however, attempt to extend the immunity principle to nonconceptual content on more minimalist grounds. One could follow John Perry (2000), arguing that at least some states with nonconceptual content—such as representational states based upon proprioception—may be *about* the states of one’s limbs, joints, etc., but they only *concern* oneself.<sup>16</sup>

Perry’s own example nicely elucidates this distinction. He asks us to consider an isolated group he terms “Z-landers” who do not travel to and have no contact with parts outside of their immediate environs. When Z-landers discuss the weather (with each other, of course), they use locutions such as “It’s raining” or “It’s sunny” and act appropriately according to the current weather in Z-land. Our own assertions of “It’s raining,” in contrast, must take into account our sensitivity to weather information from locations other than our present one—as in when one calls a friend across the country to discover whether it is raining *there*. Without this possibility, Z-landers do not need their weather beliefs to be sensitive to other locations, and Perry contends that “there is no need to postulate a concept or idea of Z-

---

<sup>16</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the applicability of Perry’s distinction in this context.

land as a component of their thought, to secure the connection to Z-land. The connection is secured by the role of the whole belief in their lives" (p. 177). Accordingly, a Z-lander's weather thoughts concern Z-land in so far as they cause her to behave appropriately, but they nevertheless neither explicitly nor implicitly represent Z-land and are therefore not about it. Asking a Z-lander where it is raining would result only in puzzled looks.

The analogy to self-concerning states proves rather straightforward. Perry writes:

What each of us gets from perception may be regarded as information concerning ourselves, to explain connections between perception and action. There is no need for a self-referring component of our belief, no need for an idea or representation of ourselves. When a ball comes at me, I duck; when a milk shake is put in front of me, I advance. ... The belief needs only have the burden of registering differences in my environment, and not the burden of identifying the person about whose relation to the environment perception gives information with the person whose action is guides. (pp. 182-183)

In the case of proprioception, then, such states represent the properties and states of one's body without representing oneself, instead simply concerning oneself in that they regulate and mediate one's own behavior in the appropriate way. We may need to identify the subject of such states when specifying the conditions under which such states successfully represent (or misrepresent) the property or state in question, but the states themselves need not represent the proprioceiving subject at all.

This approach can likewise provide a rather direct explanation as to how a state with nonconceptual content can be both representational and immune to error through misidentification. Since such states do represent the position of one's limbs, for example, they can still misrepresent. And regimented as self-concerning states according to Perry's suggestion they preclude any possibility of misrepresenting whose limbs are so positioned. What-misrepresentation remains a possibility, then, whereas who-misrepresentation does not, thereby honoring the immunity condition.

The minimalist approach not only squares with the immunity condition, it honors Wittgenstein's remarks concerning the special nature of some first-person expressions that gave rise to the more formal immunity condition. He writes,

To say, "I have pain" is no more a statement *about* a particular person than moaning is.... The mouth which says 'I' or the hand which is raised to indicate that it is I who wish to speak, or I who have tooth-ache, does not thereby point to anything. (1969, p. 68)

Because assertions like “I am in pain” cannot run afoul of misidentification, the first-person pronoun in such cases—those in which ‘I’ is used as subject—must not designate an individual. Accordingly, we could understand Wittgenstein as arguing that such assertions should be regimented as subjectless representations that concern the tokening individual, despite what their surface grammar might suggest.

However attractive the minimalist proposal, it captures the immunity condition incompletely at best. The canonical examples of states that are immune to error through misidentification are conscious states themselves and often depend upon what it is like for one to be in a particular state. The ascription “I am angry” is immune in the relevant way only if I feel myself to be angry; it would be subject to errors if, say, I arrived at that conclusion with the help of my therapist. Similarly, I may assert “I believe that *p*” on the basis of introspection or on the basis of canonically third-person means of discovering beliefs (reading what I have written in the past, for example), and immunity attends only those belief ascriptions resulting from introspection.<sup>17</sup> Under the minimalist proposal, immunity for states with nonconceptual content does not depend upon evidence base, resulting solely from their regimentation. It is arguable, however, that many presumably self-concerning states like those resulting from proprioception are not conscious.

Still, a minimalist might contend that only certain evidence bases give rise to states with nonconceptual content that should be regimented as self-concerning. It remains to be seen as to whether these bases can be specified in a non-question begging fashion. Nevertheless, we have reason to believe that motor representations may be neutral with regard to subject but not merely self-concerning. Research originally performed on monkeys and then expanded to humans indicates that the same neural subsystems subserve motor representations of one’s own actions and the actions of others, for motor representations are active both when one observes and when one executes an action (Gallese et al. 1996, Rizzolatti et al. 1996). These shared representations appear to facilitate imitation, for example, an ability we exploit effortlessly and early. Current data suggests that imitation admits of a generalist explanation: subjects draw upon general motor control mechanisms shaped by learning to bridge observed actions with the motor commands necessary to execute corresponding ones (Brass & Heyes 2005). Without shared representations, the motor system would have no guide in translating observed behavior into motor commands.

---

<sup>17</sup> Bermúdez (2003) argues that creatures lacking public language lack the vehicles necessary to have thoughts about thoughts, thereby ruling out introspection entirely. Immunity could therefore be restricted to first-order states, but the main criticism in the text remains.

The degree to which representations are shared across self and other remains uncertain, but mounting evidence suggests that this phenomenon is not restricted to action and the motor system. Viscero-motor centers also seem equally activated by observation and by execution. Calder et al. (2000), for example, found that damage to left insula and surrounding areas limited both a subject's ability to recognize facial expressions of disgust and to experience disgust for himself. And recent work by Singer et al. (2004) indicates that a similar mirroring mechanism facilitates feelings of empathy for pain. Indeed, our insight into the thoughts and emotions of others may rely fundamentally upon such shared representations.<sup>18</sup>

The representations involved in these mirroring mechanisms arguably cannot be merely self-concerning, for to successfully represent both observed individuals and oneself they must be regimented as subject neutral—of the form “Its hand is moving” or “x is moving his hand,” for example. This indicates, however, that many representational states involving perception and action and presumably arising from evidence bases that one would expect are friendly to the immunity condition share more in common with our judgments regarding the weather than with those of Z-landers. These representations must be sensitive to more than one individual; hence, we do need to postulate a component that designates the (or at least an) agent.<sup>19</sup>

The minimalist proposal, then, fundamentally conflicts with our growing understanding of the underpinnings of imitation, interoception, and social cognition. Accordingly, champions of states with nonconceptual content that are immune to error through misidentification once again face the difficulty that for these shared representations to be representational they must be capable of what-misrepresentation without who-misrepresentation. Since nonconceptual content lacks the necessary structure to preclude only who-misrepresentation, such states would be immune to representational errors of any kind, which ultimately precludes them from representing at all.

## 7 Conclusion

We began with the aim of closing a gap in kind between creatures lacking language and ourselves. If lacking language does rule out tokening states with conceptual content, we cannot extend the immunity condition to account for the ostensibly self-conscious states we may wish to ascribe to such creatures. States that are immune to error through misidentification as

---

<sup>18</sup> See Gallese et al. (2004) for a brief review.

<sup>19</sup> Though observation of actions triggers motor representations, we do not imitate all observed actions. Data suggest that separate parietal areas provide a separate mechanism for distinguishing which actions, emotions, etc. are one's own. Georgieff and Jeannerod (1998) have even argued for a “Who” system dedicated to determining agency.

well as representational must consist of conceptually structured content, for the immunity in question is *relative to* the representations of the subject. Conceptual content can satisfy the immunity condition since the structural features of a state that bring it into line with the Generality Constraint also underwrite its ability to be nonaccidentally about oneself. Regimenting nonconceptual content as merely self-concerning would satisfy the immunity condition but run afoul of mounting data concerning the mirror mechanisms that hinge upon representations importantly shared between self and other. Accordingly, states with nonconceptual content cannot satisfy the immunity condition, regardless of evidence base. To make room for the possibility of what-misrepresentation only by allowing for nonconceptual content to have internal structure similar to conceptual content risks undermining the explanatory power of the distinction.

Returning to our initial question regarding non-linguistic animals and prelinguistic infants, it seems that we must either temper our desire to ascribe self-conscious states to them, or we must reconsider and perhaps remap the divide between conceptual and nonconceptual content.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, we could preserve the claim that nonconceptual states can represent their tokeners nonaccidentally while abandoning immunity to error through misidentification as an explanation of nonaccidental self-reference and as necessary condition for a state to be self-conscious. Though the latter route is one I think that we should take seriously, I suspect that this option will find few supporters given the relatively wide endorsement of this condition.

Whatever course we pursue, we must relinquish a commitment central to our thinking about self-consciousness and about the minds of creatures lacking language. For despite what doubts we might harbor concerning the lowly lobster, more cognitively sophisticated animals and our own infants should give us pause. Self-consciousness does not seem to belong only to those who can express puzzlement about its nature. We just have yet to understand it in its more primitive forms.

## References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1975. The First Person. *Mind and Language*, ed. S. Guttenplan, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 45-65.
- Bermúdez, J. L., A. Marcel, and N. Eilan (eds.) 1995. *The Body and The Self*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

---

<sup>20</sup> Not everyone agrees, e.g., that our own conceptual abilities respect Evans's Generality Constraint. See, e.g., Noë (2002).



- Bermúdez, J. L. 1998. *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Bermúdez, J. L. 2003. *Thinking Without Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brass, M. and Heyes, C. 2005. Imitation: Is cognitive neuroscience solving the correspondence problem? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 9 (10): 489-495.
- Brook, A. 1994. *Kant and the Mind*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Buxbaum, L. J., Kyle, K. M., & Menon, R. 2005. On beyond mirror neurons: Internal representations subserving imitation and recognition of skilled object-related actions in humans. *Cognitive Brain Research*, 24: 226-239
- Calder, J.A., Keane, J., Manes, F., Antoun, N. and Young, A.W. 2000. Impaired recognition and experience of disgust following brain injury. *Nature Neuroscience*, 3 (11): 1077-1078.
- Campbell, J. 1999. Immunity to Error Through Misidentification and the Meaning of a Referring Term. *Philosophical Topics*, 26: 89-104.
- Carey, S. 1982. Semantic Development: The State of the Art. *Language Acquisition: The State of the Art*, ed. E. Wanner and L.R. Gleitman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cassam, Q. 1997. *Self and World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Evans, G. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fodor, J. A. 1998. *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press.
- Gallese, V., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., Rizzolatti, G. 1996. Action recognition in the premotor cortex. *Brain*, 119: 593-609.
- Gallese, V., Keysers, Christian, & Rizzolatti, G. 2004. A unifying view of the basis of social cognition. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8 (9): 396-403.
- Hurley, S. L. 1998. *Consciousness in Action*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, J. 1994. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Noë, A. 2002. Is Perspectival Self-Consciousness Non-Conceptual? *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 52, 207: 185-194.
- Peacocke, C. 1992. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Perry, J. 1979. The Problem of the Essential Indexical. *Noûs*, 13, 1: 3-21.
- Pryor, J. 1999. Immunity to Error Through Misidentification. *Philosophical Topics*, 26: 271-304.
- Rizzolatti, G., Fadiga, L., Gallese, V., & Fogassi, L. 1996. Premotor cortex and the recognition of motor actions. *Cognitive Brain Research*, 3: 131-141.

- Shoemaker, S. 1968. Self-Reference and Self-Awareness. *The Journal of Philosophy* 65 (19): 555-67.
- Shoemaker, S. 1986. Introspection and the Self. *The First-Person Perspective and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 3-24.
- Shoemaker, S. 1994. Self-Knowledge and 'Inner Sense'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54: 249-314.
- Shoemaker, S. 1996. *The First-Person Perspective and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singer, T., Seymour, B., O'Doherty, J., Kaube, H., Dolan, R. J., & Frith, C. D. 2004. Empathy for pain involves the affective but not sensory components of pain. *Science*, 30: 1157-1162.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

*Roblin Meeks*  
*Princeton University*  
*91 Prospect Avenue*  
*Princeton, NJ 08544 – United States*  
[rmEEKS@princeton.edu](mailto:rmEEKS@princeton.edu)

---

# Les Liaisons Dangereuses or How Not to Construe Nonconceptual Content

ALISON J. CREESE AND JULIEN A. DEONNA

## 1 Introduction

The notion of nonconceptual content (NCC) promises to provide philosophers with an exciting opportunity for finding novel explanations for a range of puzzles within philosophy of mind. So it is important to emphasize that, if the notion of nonconceptual content is to prove useful, we must be provided with a substantive account of what NCC consists in and how it is to be ascribed. In this paper we will focus specifically on an account of NCC attributable to Bermúdez. His account is interesting because it allows the possibility of appealing to representational states to explain the behavior of creatures in cases in which it seems inappropriate to attribute mastery of concepts. Given this explanatory task, Bermúdez provides a rich notion of NCC that emphasizes the extent to which we need to think of NCC as compositionally structured. Whilst we agree that it is important to stress the compositionality of NCC, we shall argue that this requirement leads to a problem. The notion of NCC is essentially contrasted with the notion of conceptual content (CC). Bermúdez draws this contrast in terms of the distinction between minimal compositionality and full compositionality. The problem we wish to highlight is that the idea of a ‘limited capacity for re-combinability’, that plays a key role in Bermúdez’s elucidation of the structure of NCC, is ambiguous between two possible readings. This ambiguity gives rise to a dilemma. On the first reading, where ‘limited’ is understood

*European Review of Philosophy*  
Vol. 6: The Structure of Nonconceptual Content  
Christine van Geen and Frederique de Vignemont (eds.)  
Copyright © 2006, CSLI Publications.

as meaning ‘partial’ rather than ‘global’, we argue that the strict distinction between NCC and CC Bermúdez is after is not sustainable. On the second reading, where ‘limited’ is understood as ‘not being under the control of the will’, we do get a clear distinction between NCC and CC, but Bermúdez fails to shed light on the key explanatory idea of the theory, i.e. what it is for something to be under a creature’s will.

We begin (section 2) by reminding the reader of some familiar arguments in favor of NCC: (a) Crane’s argument according to which perceptual content cannot be thought of as a being composed of concepts if concepts are understood as defined by their inferential role. (b) This then allows us to present Bermúdez’s argument according to whom, largely for the same reasons, animals and young infants’ intentional states should not be conceived as being conceptually structured. This discussion motivates the claim that both NCC and CC should be understood as structured. We then present Bermúdez’s articulation of the contrast between NCC & CC (section 3). We show how the idea that NCC has some structure and engages in some inferential relations, but not to the extent that conceptual content does, has significant explanatory power through a discussion of a detailed example (section 4). In the final section, we expose the reasons we believe Bermúdez’s account to be unsatisfactory along the lines put forward in the opening of paragraph of this paper (section 5).

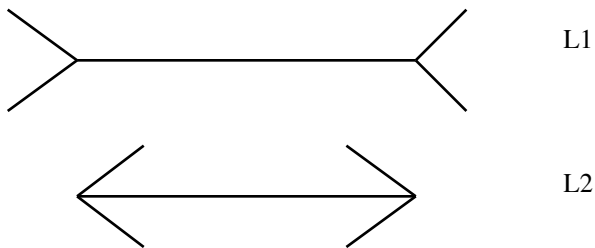
## 2 Motivations for NCC

### (a) Perceptual experience

Perhaps the most familiar motivation for drawing a distinction between NCC and CC arises in response to instances of optical illusions which suggest that the structure of the contents of perceptual experiences is different from the structure of the contents of beliefs. The first question to consider is why we cannot simply say that all intentional states just have representations as contents – in other words, why does it seem that we need to suppose that these representations are structured? The standard answer to this question has to do with the thought that intentional states play a role in our reasoning. As Crane has pointed out: ‘A thinker who believes that *a* is *F*, and that *b* is *F*, and that *a* is not *b* will be disposed to believe that at least two things are *F*’ (1992, p. 147). This suggests that the states in this inference have structured contents that enable us to explain its validity. Both states must have *F* as a part and *F* must have the same meaning in both cases - so let us begin with a very minimal definition of concept: this being that “concepts are the inferentially relevant constituents of intentional states” (Crane 1992, p. 147). More specifically, Crane claims that beliefs

are holistically related to one another by at least three kinds of inferential relations: logical or deductive relations; semantic relations; and evidential relations (p. 151). He then argues that the content of perceptual experience is not structured in the same way. It is this difference in structure that is captured by the distinction drawn between CC and NCC.

Why then take it that the content of a perception is different in structure from the content of a belief? First it appears that unlike with belief, there are no deductive inferences between perceptions. If I believe that *a* is F and I believe that *a* is G then I can infer the belief that *a* is F and G. However, “it seems plain that there is no such thing as a deductive inference between perceptions” (Crane, p. 152). If I perceive that *a* is F and I perceive that *a* is G, I cannot then infer the perception that *a* is F and G. Secondly, there appears to be no semantic relation between perceptions. In the case of belief the idea is that, if you have the belief that P, then there are certain other beliefs that you ought to have if that belief is to have the content P” (p. 154). So for example if you have the belief that cheese is nutritious, you ought to have the belief that cheese is edible. These beliefs are related by the ‘semantic’ properties of their contents. However, in the case of perception, if you perceive that p, “there are no other perceptions that you ought to have,” (p. 154). Thirdly, unlike beliefs, perceptions are not revisable on the basis of evidence. Consider the following famous example:<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 1 – The Müller-Lyer Illusion*

Where a perceiver, P, is presented with the Müller-Lyer Illusion, the perceiver cannot help but see L1 as longer than L2. This will be the case even if P firmly believes that the lines are the same length. This shows that P can continue to undergo an illusion even when P knows that things are not as they appear. Furthermore, it is equally possible not to believe what one

<sup>1</sup> Crane, T., (1992, p. 150).

seems to see. This example is typically used to show that perceptual experience is not revisable on the basis of evidence.

Drawing attention to the difference between perceptual experience and belief as a way of motivating the distinction between CC and NCC is familiar. By emphasizing the way in which the structure of perceptual experience does not appear to support a very common way of understanding the nature of concepts (i.e. defined by their inferential role), Crane did much to illuminate the distinction between CC and NCC. This is a very good starting point for us, as Bermúdez, in his own account of NCC, appears to endorse the same conception on the nature of concepts. His main focus however is on the manner in which we should account for the thoughts of infants and animals. Attributing contentful states to creatures without language, he argues, presupposes that it must be possible to have contentful thoughts not composed of concepts understood as specified by their inferential roles. But let us proceed in an orderly manner.

#### (b) Non-linguistic Creatures

Explanation of the behavior of nonlinguistic and prelinguistic creatures often appeals to mental states that represent the world. Whether or not this provides a motivation for the notion of NCC will depend on what view is held regarding what it is to possess a concept. It is often assumed that conceptual capacities are linked with linguistic abilities. According to what Bermúdez (1995) calls The Priority Principle, conceptual abilities are constitutively linked with linguistic abilities in such a way that conceptual abilities cannot be possessed by non-linguistic creatures. However the combination of the Priority principle and the idea that mental representation requires conceptual capacities seems to entail that animals and infants do not have intentional states. If we then take it that perceptions are intentional states, then this entails that animals and infants do not have perceptions. This will seem to many, including us, an undesirable consequence. In order to avoid simply biting the bullet we need to consider whether any of the assumptions we have just made are open to doubt.

A possible candidate for doubt is of course the assumption that perceptions are intentional states. That perceptual experiences are intentional however is not a thesis anyone is likely to question. The next move we might make is to either:

1. Reject the Priority Principle; or
2. Retain the Priority Principle but reject the assumption that the only way to understand the content of intentional states is in terms of conceptual capacities.

Bermúdez takes the latter option. This is because he takes it to be a benefit of his view that even if we retain the priority principle we can still credit non-linguistic creatures with intentional states.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as we shall see, Bermúdez retains the minimal notion of concepts as being inferentially relevant constituents of mental states. Still, he argues for the possibility of content which is structured but nonconceptual.

It is important to retain the idea that mental states with content are structured. One of the traditional reasons for insisting on this point is that perception plays an important role in justification. It is reasonable to maintain that perceptual experience provides grounds for perceptual beliefs. It seems natural to think, for instance, that my seeing a table in the kitchen justifies my believing that there is a table in the kitchen. If the content of my perceptual experience had no structure, if there were no structured constituents, then it is difficult to make sense of the possibility of such a justification, at least if justification is conceived on an inferential model as it often is. Thus, it is important to note that the proponents of NCC are not claiming that NCC's are unstructured. Crane notes that, "to say that perceptions lack inferential structure of the kind typical of beliefs does not mean that they are entirely unstructured" (p. 153).<sup>3</sup> Similarly Bermúdez claims that states with nonconceptual content are "compositionally structured" (1998, p. 94). However if we claim that states with conceptual and NCC are all structured then we need to consider what the difference between the two kinds of content consists in. In the following section we shall consider one way in which it is possible to distinguish states with NCC from states with CC.

### 3 The structure of NCC

The criteria that Bermúdez identifies as essential for a state to qualify as an intentional state with NCC are as follows:

- (1) They should serve to explain behaviors in situations where the connections between sensory input and behavioral output cannot be plotted in a law-like manner.
- (2) They should admit of cognitive integration.

---

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we shall not discuss the merits of the Priority principle. Not only it has been discussed extensively (see for example *Psycoloquy*: 11 (2000) for a series of targeted articles on the topic), but for the purpose of our argument, we shall grant Bermúdez his assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> Note however that, in Crane's account, it is not obvious what role the structured nature of perceptual content plays as far as justification for belief is concerned. For Crane, perception justifies belief non-inferentially, or as he says, at the level of 'whole' content.

(3) They should be compositionally structured in such a way that their elements can be constituents of other representational states.

(4) They should permit the possibility of misrepresentation.<sup>4</sup>

The question that this then poses is what further criteria must be satisfied for a state to be properly described as one with CC? Furthermore, does it make sense to maintain that a state that admits of cognitive integration (2) and that is compositionally structured (3) is not necessarily composed of concepts (understood minimally as being inferentially relevant constituents). Again, it is reasonable to contend that Bermúdez would be happy to accept the minimal definition of concept we are assuming here. He writes:

Mastery of a concept is tied up with the grasp of its inferential role, where a concept's inferential role can be understood in terms of its contribution to the inferential powers of propositions in which it features (1998, p. 67; see also Bermúdez 1995, section 1.3).

If there is indeed a problem here then it might seem that Bermúdez has not succeeded in identifying a contentful state that is not necessarily composed of concepts.

Let us begin by considering Bermúdez' claim that in order to qualify as intentional, states with NCC must be compositionally structured. We need to take it that intentional states are compositional in order for them to play a role in the explanation of action. For example, Bermúdez invites us to suppose that, "a creature represents its environment as containing food in an exposed place with a predator within striking distance." He goes on to point out that:

If its ensuing behavior is not to be driven either by the association food-eat or by the association predator-flee, the creature will have to evaluate whether it can reach the food without the predator noticing, whether the food is worth the risk, whether having gained the food it can then escape to safety etc. These primitive forms of inference require being able to distinguish the various elements in the original representation and to integrate them with comparable elements in other representational states (1998, p. 91).

So explaining the animal's behavior requires attributing compositional states because compositionality allows integration between different mental states.

The requirement of compositional structure has been the focus of much discussion of the conditions for ascribing conceptual content. Gareth Evans' Generality Constraint, which has inspired much of these discussions, seems to be accepted by those in favor of the notion of NCC as well as those opposed to NCC.

---

<sup>4</sup> Bermúdez, (1998, p. 94)



The generality constraint: We cannot avoid thinking of a thought about an individual object  $x$ , to the effect that it is  $F$ , as the exercise of two separable capacities; one being the capacity to think of  $x$ , which could be equally exercised in thoughts about  $x$  to the effect that it is  $G$  or  $H$ ; and the other being a conception of what it is to be  $F$ , which could be equally exercised in thoughts about other individuals, to the effect that they are  $F$ . (Evans, 1982, p. 75.)

It seems to be taken by many that the Generality Constraint provides both necessary and sufficient conditions for ascribing CC. It is reasonable to contend that Bermúdez concurs with this view – he writes, “the idea of concepts as the essentially recombinable constituents of thought is familiar enough not to require further discussion” (1998, p. 92). Nevertheless, he insists that states with NCC have compositional structure. So his claim seems to be that a state can have compositional structure and yet not satisfy the Generality Constraint. This then purportedly allows for the possibility that we can ascribe a state with compositional structure to a creature without necessarily ascribing a state with constitutive concepts. So what we need to consider is how to distinguish a state with minimal compositionality from a state with full compositionality understood in terms of the Generality Constraint.

Bermúdez has an answer to this question. He accepts that global recombinability requires compositionality. However he claims that, “compositional structure can exist in the absence of global recombinability. And this is exactly how we should understand NCC,” (p. 93). So what does he mean by this?

Recall that the generality constraint captures the idea that thoughts are structured. According to Evans an ability to think ' $a$  is  $F$ ' results from the joint exercise of two distinct abilities, the ability to exercise the Idea of  $a$  and the ability to exercise the concept of  $F$ . Evans here uses “Idea” to refer to an ability to think of objects, and “concept” to refer to an ability to think of properties. So a creature must have abilities which satisfy Evans’s generality constraint for both  $a$  and  $F$  if we are to be able to ascribe a state with the conceptual content “ $a$  is  $F$ ” to that creature. The abilities the creature must have are:

A. the ability to think of a particular object in indefinitely many distinct thoughts e.g.  $a$  is  $F$ ,  $a$  is  $G$ ,  $a$  is  $H$  and so on;

B. the ability to think that  $a$  is  $F$  for an arbitrary  $a$ . In other words in order for us to say that the creature has a concept of  $F$  that creature must possess the ability to apply that concept  $F$  to any thing which it has an idea of.- e.g.  $a$  is  $F$ ,  $b$  is  $F$ ,  $c$  is  $F$  - an ability that can be exercised in indefinitely many distinct thoughts.

In order for a creature to exercise its abilities to globally recombine constituents of thought in this way we need to assume that thought is compositional. Bermúdez accepts this – compositionality is a necessary condition of CC. However he does not think it is a sufficient condition. This is because he claims that compositional structure can exist in the absence of global recombining and global recombining is a necessary condition of CC. His thought is that nonconceptual thought must be structured in order to allow “recognition of partial similarities and to allow primitive forms of inference.” (1998, p. 93). Furthermore, Bermúdez goes on to say:

It is plausible to think that the transition from nonconceptual to conceptual content is at least in part a matter of moving from partially recombining content constituents to globally recombining content constituents (1998, p. 93).

So we take the difference to be that NCCs have some structure and engage in some inferential relations, but not the full set that conceptual contents do. Structural components of states with NCC are only partially recombining, says Bermúdez, but “they cannot be recombined at will” (1998, p. 93). It seems reasonable to maintain that Crane would be in broad agreement with this conclusion. Whilst he places more emphasis on the thought that the contents of perception do not have the inferential role of beliefs, he nevertheless claims that they are structured (1992, p. 155). Furthermore he allows that states with NCCs can be treated as “deducing consequences from premises” (p. 156). He then qualifies this by pointing out that they are not “holistically related in the way the contents of beliefs are” (p. 156). So we take it that he would agree that states with NCCs can engage in some inferential relations but not the full set that beliefs do.<sup>5</sup> So if we accept the possibility that intentional states can have NCC, which does not require that the creature has “the capacity to recombine elements of the representation in indefinitely many ways” or “at will”, then this enables us to credit animals and infants with intentional mental states.

#### **4 The theory through an example**

Suppose Kyle enters the room, and starts shouting and my dog runs away. Yesterday when Keely came in and shouted the dog hid under the table and the day before Rhiannon came in and shouted and the dog retreated. In each case the stimulus, shouting, results in different behavioral outputs from the dog. So here we have an example of behavior that cannot be accounted for in terms of invariant relations between sensory input and behavioral output. So

---

<sup>5</sup> But see footnote 3.

in order to explain the dog's running away behavior on this occasion we need to ascribe intentional states to the dog that play the role of intermediary between stimulus and behavioral output. Now before we consider what these might be let us suppose that there have been many times when each of them has come into the room, spoken gently and given the dog an edible treat. There have been other times when Keely has shouted, and then dragged the dog painfully by its collar into the garden and shut it out. It is reasonable to suppose that the reason the dog is able to respond flexibly to features of its environment and learn and adapt is because its present representational states integrate with stored representations. Its response now is determined by interaction between present representations and stored representations: in other words, as Bermúdez points out, "there must be pathways enabling a given representational state to connect up with other states, both representational and motivational" (1998, p. 91). The dog needs to be capable of registering when the environment is relevantly similar over time. And this means that the relevant states must be compositional in the sense that they have structured constituent elements that can be decomposed and recombined with constituent elements of other representational states.

So let us suppose that the dog has stored representations of the various quiet, treat providing people and shouting, painful collar pulling Keely. Today when Kyle comes into the room the dog represents shouting Kyle. The dog is able to register the similarity of this representation to stored representations of shouting, painful collar pulling Keely. We then need to ascribe a primitive form of inference that is required to explain the dog distinguishing the shouting element of its present representation of shouting Kyle connecting with its stored representation of shouting, painful collar pulling Keely. The inference being: shouting, if shouting then painful collar pulling that in turn triggers the fleeing behavior. The integration between present and stored representations through the dog's capacity for inference – albeit limited – explains the subsequent running away.

Let us attempt to describe what happens in this example in the light of Bermúdez's account. The main point is of course that the dog's ability to make inferences is a limited, low-level ability. How should we understand the idea of "limited ability to make inferences"? One natural way of understanding the idea, one that is clearly suggested by Bermúdez, is that what is going on here is an inferential transition that we can describe as such but the dog cannot recognize. The dog does not draw an inference in the sense that it grasps general rules of inference or recognizes that their application is appropriate in the given context. In other words, there is no reason to think that the dog's inferential transition is a conscious, reflective act. The question of whether or not the dog is justified in inductively inferring painful

collar pulling from shouting Kyle is not one that arises for the dog. The dog is not capable of this kind of higher-level thinking: this provides a way of understanding Bermúdez's claim that NCCs integrate with other nonconceptual concepts via connections between constituents that can be described as "primitive" inferential transitions. The NCCs that we ascribed to the dog can be decomposed and recombined but the constituents of these contents can only be partially recombined, they "cannot be recombined at will" (1998a, p. 93). This can be taken to mean that the pathways that enable constituents to integrate are low level and constrained by the creature's evolutionary background and environmental influences. Different creatures have different mechanisms, which have been naturally selected, that enable them to re-identify and recombine a limited range of represented features of their environment. At the level of NCC the range of environmental features that the creature can detect will be constrained by the inbuilt mechanisms it has and the actual learning experiences of the particular creature. A dog does not have the ability to recombine detected segments of its sensory field at will – it is an unreflective response to the environment represented. To do so would require the ability to think reflectively about the content of the representations and we have no reason to suppose that dogs can do this.

Crane's articulation of the distinction between CC and NCC can further illuminate Bermúdez's model. When we say that the dog sees a bone on the floor we are taking it that it is capable of parsing its visual array into bounded segments one of which corresponds to the bone object. However even if we take it that the dog is able to do this, it does not follow that the dog forms the belief that there is a bone on the floor. As already emphasized, beliefs cannot be held in isolation. In order to believe P – that there is a bone on the floor I must also be capable of believing logical consequences of this belief, e.g. the belief that P or Q. In order to be credited with the belief that there is a bone, as opposed to some other object, I must be capable of believing other things about bones, e.g. that they come from animals. The idea being that my belief would not be about bones unless I have other relevant beliefs. Furthermore, I cannot believe that there is a bone on the floor unless I am disposed to regard a perception of a hard, white, meaty object as evidence for this belief. These are the abilities that are required for a creature to be credited with mastery of concepts. So another way in which we might express this latter point is to say that the creature to which we ascribe NCC does not have to master the concepts that we use to ascribe the content. Animals and infants, says Bermúdez, "parse the visual array into bounded segments, even though they have no conceptual grasp of what those bounded segments are" (1998, p. 72). This means that although they are able to parse their visual array into bounded segments and recognize

similarities between present representations and stored representations, they cannot recognize deductive, semantic and evidential relational properties between constituents of representations. These abilities are required to credit a creature with a concept-using cognitive system that can take up information about the environment thanks to the lower level representational activities of the perceptual system.

## 5 Evaluation of the theory

It is now time to evaluate Bermúdez's account of NCC. We agree that it is important to stress the compositionality of NCC and we have shown that the idea that NCC has some structure and engages in some inferential relations has significant explanatory power. What we need now is a way of fleshing out the idea that NCC does not enter into the full range of inferential relations that CC does. Bermúdez's explanation of this feature of the distinction rests on the contrast he draws between minimal compositionality and full compositionality. Recall that the problem we wish to highlight arises from the way in which Bermúdez distinguishes between different ways in which a creature can be said to have the capacity for recombining.

The problem results from Bermúdez' use of the idea of "limited recombining": in effect, he often treats two different distinctions as if they were one and the same. The first distinction is between partial and global recombining and the second one is between recombining at will and recombining not at will. We shall argue that if we are correct thinking that these two distinctions are orthogonal to one another, then Bermúdez faces a dilemma. On the one hand, either the difference between the conceptual and the nonconceptual has to be understood in terms of the first distinction, in which case we believe that Bermúdez is wrong in thinking that a strict demarcation line between the conceptual and the nonconceptual can be sustained; on the other hand, if the difference is to be understood in terms of the second distinction, then Bermúdez has to do much more than he has done in order to explicate what is meant by the idea of "recombining at will".

Let us begin by exploring the distinction between partial and global recombining. If we do not read anything beyond and above what this distinction suggests, then the conceptual vs. nonconceptual character of a given content is directly dependent on the extent to which the bearer of this content is capable of exploiting the full range of inferential possibilities (evidential, semantic, logical) that its structure permits. Now, the only way in which the distinction between partial and global recombining understood in this way would warrant a strict division between NCC and CC would be if we had a principled way to decide where to draw the line between the

‘very partial’, ‘the less partial’, ‘the almost global’ and ‘the global’. Talk of partial and global suggests that one’s capacity for recombining is a matter of degree only; and the question arises as to where on this continuum the line should be drawn. Now, the most natural way to draw the line might well be to consider anything less than global recombining to belong ipso facto to NCC. But as natural as this move might be, it cannot be taken for granted. For there is no reason – apart from the constraints stemming from the theory itself – to refrain from attributing the capacity for conceptual thinking to a creature who, for a reason or another, was on occasion incapable of drawing those inferences that its thoughts permit. A creature having horrible difficulties in applying *modus tollens* when the situation calls for it can very well be described as having less than global recombining capacities but can hardly for this reason be said not to be capable of conceptual thought. So the only way in which we can sensibly draw a distinction between partial and global recombining powers with regard to our topic, (and this where the first horn of the dilemma leads) is that content might be more or less conceptual with respect to another depending on whether the bearer of this content is more or less capable of recombining its parts with the parts of some other content, namely, on whether its bearer is more or less capable of exploiting the full range of inferences (evidential, semantic, logical) that its structure permits. On this view, conceptuality would be a matter of degree. This in effect might be a respectable way of cashing out what we mean by ‘nonconceptual’ content, but certainly not the one that Bermúdez had in mind.

One way of drawing the line in a manner that would meet the requirement for a strict demarcation between the two domains is to appeal to the difficult notion of “recombining at will”, which is precisely what Bermúdez does. This would be to take the route that leads one to the second horn of the dilemma. What would decisively distinguish between a creature capable of conceptual thought would be his capacity to voluntarily apply the rules governing the ways in which the components of its thoughts can be recombined. Note however that the question of whether a creature is capable of recombining at will is independent of the question of whether its recombining powers are partial or global. As our example in the previous paragraph shows, one might have a partial capacity for recombining that is subject to the will. Conversely, one might have global recombining powers but not be able to exercise them at will. A computer might be programmed in a way that it has global recombining powers, but it is only metaphorically that we would ascribe to it a capacity to recombine at will. There is no reason to think, then, even in the actual world, that the extensions specified by the two distinctions map onto one another. And what this suggests is that

the idea of 'one being in a position to willingly recombine structured components of one's thoughts or not' has nothing to do with the extent to which one is capable of recombining the component of different of thoughts.

The capacity of recombining "at will" is, as discussion of the example in the previous section illustrates, directly dependent on one's capacity to recognize or appreciate the manner in which one's thoughts are structured and in what way this structure could be deployed for the purpose of inference. And this strongly echoes what Peacocke once thought constituted a necessary condition for content possession:

The representational content [of an experience] is the way the experience presents the world as being, and it can hardly present the world as being that way if the subject is incapable of appreciating what that way is.<sup>6</sup>

Keep in mind that we are here talking of content and not conceptual content. Now Bermúdez has never endorsed this (much talked about) minimal condition for content and Peacocke has since rejected it.<sup>7</sup> However, it is now tempting, to ascribe to Bermúdez the thought that Peacocke's early suggestion concerning content constitutes a necessary condition for conceptual content. On this alternative reading of what it would mean to have a capacity for recombining then – the route to the second horn of the dilemma – what determines whether or not content is conceptual is for its compositional nature to be such that it can be appreciated or recognized and willingly used for the purpose of reasoning.

Now, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with this understanding of what it takes to be a creature capable of conceptual thought. In particular, it allows for the strict demarcation between conceptual thought and nonconceptual thought that Bermúdez is after. The fact is that there is nothing more familiar than the idea that reflexivity and will is what distinguishes us from creatures that cannot indulge in conceptualization. The problem however is that we are left with nothing more than the familiar idea. The rich theoretical apparatus developed by Bermúdez, from the autonomy principle to the priority principle, to talk of partial and global recombining, cannot shed light on what it means for a creature to willingly indulge in an activity. We are in effect left with the initial realization that whereas normative con-

---

<sup>6</sup> Peacocke (1983), p.7

<sup>7</sup> Both believe that a much weaker necessary condition for content is all that is needed, *i.e.* that a state presents the world as being in a certain way if and only if there is a condition or set of conditions under which it does so correctly, and the content of the state is given in terms of what it would be for it to present the world correctly (Peacocke1992, Bermúdez 1995).

straints on thought appear to hold for us humans and not for other kinds animals, i.e. that we ought to willingly make the inferences our thoughts permit; and it is hard to see anything in Bermúdez' articulation of the distinction between NCC and CC that would help us to understand this better. Recall (1) that animals are just like us in having structured thought with propositional content. Recall (2) that they are just like us in that their thoughts interact and their components get recombined with other thoughts to produce behavior. Finally, recall that (3) we cannot help but describe their behavior without suggesting that what they do is voluntary ("the creature will have to evaluate whether it can reach the food without the predator noticing, whether the food is worth the risk, whether having gained the food it can then escape to safety", 1998, p. 91, our emphasis). The point is thus that what distinguishes us from them essentially is that, contrary to appearances, they do not do it willingly, i.e. in a way that would warrant praise or blame. It would be thus essential to have an explanation of what recombining at will means, and what Bermúdez's account provides at most is a pressing reason for looking for such an explanation. Furthermore, if this diagnosis is correct, then talk of the nonconceptual appears to us to do very little work in the account. Not being capable of willingly recombine constituents of one's thoughts will be a special instance of creature's behavior that is not governed by normative constraints. Calling the contents of their thoughts nonconceptual is a luxury that we might wish to adopt, but that we could also dispense with.

We have argued that at least on two plausible readings of Bermúdez's account of NCC, we end up with interpretations that do not fit well with his own conception of what he has accomplished. It is not our opinion though that he has accomplished nothing. Construing NCC on a propositional model which constituents are defined in terms of their inferential role is bound to attract the kind of criticism we have attempted to articulate here. Our argument has been that neither of the two reading proposed straightforwardly justifies talk of a distinct level of content that we should call nonconceptual. This of course leaves open the possibility that, first, one or the other position imposed by our two readings is correct and worth developing and, second, that another way of construing nonconceptual content is true.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Julien Deonna wishes to thank the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research for their financial support while he was writing this article



## References

- Bermúdez, J. 1998. *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Bermúdez, J. and Macpherson, F. 1998. NCC and the Nature of Perceptual Experience. *The Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, <http://ejap.louisiana.edu/EJAP/1998/bermmacp98.html>.
- Bermúdez, J. 1995. NCC: From Perceptual Experience to Subpersonal Computational States. *Mind and language*, 10(4 ), 333-369.
- Crane, T. 1992. The NCC of experience. *The contents of Experience*, ed. T. Crane, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 136-157.
- Evans, G. 1984. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peacocke, C. 1983. *Sense and Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peacocke, C. 1992. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Peacocke, C. 1992. Scenarios, contents & perception. *The Contents of Experience* ed. T. Crane. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 105-135.

*Dr Alison J. Creese,  
Department of Philosophy - Faculty of Arts  
The Open University  
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA UK  
[aliecee@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:aliecee@yahoo.co.uk)*

*Dr Julien A. Deonna  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Lausanne  
CH-1015 Lausanne - Switzerland  
[julien.deonna@lettres.unige.ch](mailto:julien.deonna@lettres.unige.ch)*



# European Review of Philosophy, vol. 6

## *The Structure of Nonconceptual Content*

### **Contributors**

Michael Tye, Department of Philosophy, University of Texas.

Sonia Sedivy, Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto.

Manuel Garcia-Carpintero, Department of Logic and Philosophy of science,  
University of Barcelona.

Roblin R. Meeks, Princeton University.

Alison J. Creese, Department of Philosophy, Bristol University.

Julien A. Deonna, Department of Philosophy, University of Lausanne