

THE STRUCTURE OF PERCEPTUAL CONTENT

by

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Abstract

Philosophers often endorse the claim that perceptual experience has content. However, the significance of this claim is highly disputed. A particularly central issue is the relationship between concepts and the content of perceptual experience. Accounts of this relationship are largely shaped by a key question; is perceptual content itself conceptual, or is it nonconceptual? In the following thesis, I focus on this debate, and consider arguments in favour of both conceptualism and nonconceptualism. The first chapter lays the foundation for the other two, by developing some general views about perceptual content, and what it means to claim that the content of perceptual experience is either conceptual or nonconceptual. In the second chapter, arguments on behalf of conceptualism are discussed, which largely focus on epistemic issues surrounding perceptual experience. The third chapter discusses the idea that perceptual experience outstrips conceptual resources in various ways. I argue that on the balance of considerations, primarily due to certain ways in which experience is situation dependent, a stronger case can be made for nonconceptualism.

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Chapter 1

The Content of Perceptual Experience

1.1) Introduction and Overview

It is common for a thought to form directly because of a perceptual experience. For example, I might think that I'm hearing a violin because of the auditory experience I am having. There is an influential trend, in both epistemology and philosophy of mind, towards accounting for the connection between perception and thought in content-involving terms. However, while perceptual content may have much in common with thought content, there is vast disagreement about the ways in which these types of content resemble one another. One of the most prominent debates concerns whether the contents of perceptual experience are wholly conceptual.

Epistemic considerations often motivate the view that any perceptual experience must have conceptual content.¹ For many conceptualists, such as John McDowell² and Bill Brewer³, a crucial issue is the role of perceptual experience in the formation of certain beliefs and judgements. It is widely agreed that many perceptual experiences lead to beliefs which can be justified. It is also often thought that experiences themselves play a role in the justification of beliefs. For instance, I might believe that there is a red ball on the table, and be justified in holding that belief because of the visual experience I am having. A common argument on behalf of conceptualism is that in order for experience to provide the kind of reasons needed for epistemic justification, the contents of

¹ Instead of discussing conceptual content and nonconceptual content, it would probably be more accurate to always use the phrases conceptually structured content and nonconceptually structured content. The reasons for this will emerge as we proceed. However, given the entrenchment of "nonconceptual content" talk in the literature, it seems useful to retain the less precise terms.

² Cf. McDowell, J. 1994. *Mind and World*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

³ Cf. Brewer, B. 1999. *Perception and Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

perceptual experience must have a wholly conceptual structure. This line of thought has been challenged; direct criticism has been offered by Richard Heck⁴, Christopher Peacocke⁵, and many others. An indirect challenge has been posed by Alan Millar, who develops a highly detailed account of how perceptual experiences can justify beliefs, without requiring that the experiences themselves have conceptually structured contents.⁶

Many leading arguments on behalf of nonconceptual perceptual content focus on some general observations about perceptual experiences. I will focus mainly on arguments about richness of information, fineness of grain, and situation dependency. First, in perceptual experience, it seems that a subject is presented with a richness of information that surpasses what human conceptual resources can handle all at once. This has sometimes been discussed in terms of digital and analogue information processing, and for our purposes, the distinction has been put forward most perspicuously by Fred Dretske.⁷ A second consideration is that perceptual experiences seem to be fine grained in a way that can't be handled by concepts. As noted by Gareth Evans, I see far more shapes than I can recognize, and can discriminate far more shades of colour than I can name; this suggests perceptual experiences involve nonconceptual elements.⁸ A third consideration is that perceptual experiences are situation dependent in a way that conceptually structured content couldn't be. For example, when I perceive the blue of a woolly rug, the wooliness of the rug seems to affect my experience of the blue, resulting

⁴Cf. Heck, R. 2000. "Nonconceptual content and the 'space of reasons'", in *Philosophical Review* 109, 483-523.

⁵ See Especially Peacocke, C. 2001. "Does perception have a nonconceptual content?", in *Journal of Philosophy* 98, 239-264.

⁶ Cf. Millar, A. 1991a. "Concepts, Experience, and Inference," in *Mind* 100(4), 495-505. A larger treatment of these issues can be found in Millar, A. 1991b. *Reasons and Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Cf. Dretske, F. 1981. *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*. Cambridge MA. MIT Press.

⁸ Cf. Evans, G. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

in an overall experience that appears to be outside the scope of conceptual resources. Sean Kelly presents compelling arguments for why the situation dependency of experience suggests perceptual contents are nonconceptual.⁹

The above arguments in favour of a nonconceptualist approach are not conclusive, and there are several difficulties with each general approach. However, as suggested above, conceptualism has also been extensively challenged, and it has problems of its own. In chapter two, the epistemic role of perceptual experiences is focused on, and several arguments on behalf of conceptualism are examined. Despite the merits of these arguments, it is argued that there is a great deal of room to resist the main conclusions reached by conceptualists. In chapter three the focus is on arguments in support of nonconceptualism. The main arguments considered all explore observations that suggest perceptual experience outstrips conceptual resources. The idea that perceptual experience is situation dependent in certain ways, despite various difficulties, will be put forward as providing the strongest support for adopting some form of nonconceptualism.

Before turning to arguments offered in favour of conceptualism or nonconceptualism, however, there is much to be said about what is at issue in the first place. The idea of perceptual content, while sometimes treated as a well understood notion, involves many underlying assumptions which are not always clear, and which are not universally accepted. As the type of content we are interested in is the content of perceptual experience, it is important to begin by clarifying what is meant by perceptual experience. Furthermore, while in general it seems viable to think of content as information which is represented to the subject, there are many issues underlying the very

⁹ Cf. Kelly, S. 2001. "The non-conceptual content of perceptual experience: Situation dependence and fineness of grain", in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, 601-608.

idea of content which seem beneficial to work through. As a final point, nonconceptual content is a fundamentally contrastive term; just what is meant by it, and what its significance is taken to be, hinges on various views about the conceptual more generally. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to frame the discussion which follows by directly focusing on the ideas of perceptual experience, perceptual content, conceptual content, and nonconceptual content.¹⁰

1.2) Perceptual Experience

In order to describe what perceptual experiences are, it is perhaps simplest to try and describe *experiences* and *perceptions*. To begin with “experience,” as the term is used here, it is definitional of an *experience* that it has some phenomenology. In other words, in order to have an experience, there must be something it is like to have the experience. That is, in order to be like something, the experience must seem to be a certain way to the subject.¹¹

There are a wide range of mental states that seem to be a certain way. For example, seeing red seems to you to be a certain way, and it seems like something else to imagine a unicorn, suffer pain, be angry, or orient yourself towards the direction where your car is parked. To put things more precisely, all of these cases involve a seeming that things are a certain way. This means that when you see something that looks red to you, your experience involves something seeming to be a particular colour. The sense of

¹⁰ It is likely that many of the claims put forward in developing these ideas are more debatable than I portray them to be. I will simply note that the claims endorsed are meant to reflect the typical views held by participants in the debate over nonconceptual content, while being as neutral as possible over the debate itself.

¹¹ There are some ambiguities in the claim that an experience must seem to be a certain way to the subject. These will hopefully be cleared up as we proceed. At the outset, however, it may be worth stating that this claim is about the content of experience (and not the experiential state itself, or the having of the experience independently of its details, or anything other than the content).

seems that is relevant here can be further clarified by noting its affinity with “feels;” in the case of suffering pain, the way your pain feels constitutes how suffering that pain seems to be. The specific way it seems to a subject to have a given experience is the phenomenal character of the experience. This can also be called the “subjective” or “qualitative” character of the experience.

Insofar as it is an experience, then, a perceptual experience is a mental state with phenomenal character. In order to be *perceptual*, the experience needs to be shaped by a sensory modality. These are the five major sense modalities – visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory – along with balance, bodily sensations, and proprioception.¹² At any given waking moment, one’s overall experience is influenced by experiences in some, and often all, of these sensory modalities, along with input from other modalities (such as emotions and background moods). As overall experiences can mix modalities in very complicated ways, it can be possible to have an experience which is only partially perceptual; for example, you might have had the experience of angrily looking at the red wine spilled all over your white carpet.

There has been some discussion about what it means for something to be shaped by a sensory modality.¹³ For example, if I have an experience of a desk, but am hallucinating, or just imagining it, there is an obvious sense in which I do not perceive a desk. Cases like these are different from when I see a desk that looks like such and so because light reflected off the desk, entered my eyes, and was visually processed in the appropriate ways. The point here is that there is a difference between genuine perceptions, hallucinations, imaginings, and other types of experiences which have a

¹² There may be additional modalities that qualify as sensory; the list here is just meant to highlight some of the clearest examples.

¹³ For a good discussion of this issue, see Millar, *Reasons and Experience*, *op cit*.

sensory feel to them. It can be argued that in order to have a *sensory shape* at all, an experience must be underpinned by an actual perception. This view, however, seems to depend on reserving the words “sensory shape” for an overly specialized usage, and won’t be adopted in what follows.

A different, related, terminological stipulation seems useful. As most work on perceptual experiences is about experiences generated by actual perception, it is appropriate to reserve the term “perceptual experience” for these experiences. As the term will be used here, then, a *perceptual experience* will be taken to be a mental state with a phenomenal character shaped by a subject’s normal perceptual processes at the relevant time. However, it should be noted that this issue is being left at the level of stipulation; the restricted adoption used here is purely to help clarify what is being discussed. It is the case that a few writers do prefer to use the term “perceptual experience” more widely, and apply it to any mental state with a phenomenal character that has a sensory shape.¹⁴

As a perceptual experience is grounded in normal perceptual processes, which gather and organize information about the world, it is capable of telling its subject something about the world. More precisely, a perceptual experience can tell its subject about the world as it is experienced.¹⁵ For example, suppose I hear a sound; any sound at all. As described above, in order to experience it, what I hear has to have some kind of phenomenal character; it has to be like this, or like that. What the sound is like, however, tells me something about the sound as I represent it in experience; if it sounds like a cat

¹⁴ One example is Chalmers, D. 2004. “Perception and the Fall from Eden”, in T. Gendler & J. Hawthorne, eds, *Perceptual Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Note here that sensory shape is being used in the broader sense endorsed in the previous paragraph.

¹⁵ Unless I indicate otherwise, when I claim that a perceptual experiences tells (in some sense) its subject about the world, “the world” means the world as it is experienced.

meowing to me, then I have at least some information about what I've heard.

Furthermore, as normal perceptual processes directed at the world underpin what the sound seems like to me, perceptual experiences can convey information about the world.¹⁶ This is one way of saying that perceptual experiences have content, but the idea deserves much closer attention; what does it mean to claim that something has content?

1.3) Perceptual Content

“Content” is largely a term of philosophical art, and it is used in many different, often related ways. In the literature there are discussions of linguistic content, semantic content, propositional content, descriptive content, narrow content, broad content, mental content, intentional content, perceptual content, conceptual content, nonconceptual content; and the list goes on. How to differentiate these types of content, and how to understand what they have in common, is a complex issue. One source of difficulty is the vagueness of the term “content” itself. Due to the status of its various occurrences, at the most general level, it may be fair to say that “content” is a deliberately vague term; perhaps it is something roughly synonymous with “meaning.” Despite its somewhat elusive character, however, it seems possible to work out some basic general ideas behind talk of content.

A helpful place to start is with the ideas of information and representation. In most cases, while the way of putting this point may vary slightly, anything that carries information is thought to have content; the content *consists* of the information being

¹⁶ In cases of perceptual illusion, such as when a stick put in water looks bent, the information presented to the subject fails to get things completely right; however, even in these cases, information is still conveyed to the subject by normal perceptual processes. As actual perception underpins the experiences, we can be confident that these experiences tell the subject something about the world, regardless of whether the experiences are misleading or not.

carried, with the information being represented in a way specific to how it is being carried. In this general sense of content, a belief state and a tree's physical state might be thought to both have content.¹⁷ Suppose someone believes that there is a tree in the field. Also suppose that the tree trunk has rings which reflect the age of the tree. In each case, we have some information – that there is a tree in the field, and that the tree is a certain age – which is carried by a state. In each case, the information contained in the given state conveys something about how things are in the world; it can be said that the information represents the world in a certain way. At the most general level, this is what the idea of content amounts to. As Tim Crane writes, “to say that any state has content is just to say that it represents the world as being a certain way.”¹⁸ While there may be reasons to be wary of the words “information” and “representation” in this context, due to theoretical associations, if we read those words in their ordinary sense, they seem well suited to capturing what the general idea of content is getting at.

The idea that “content represents the world” is fairly general; a lot does depend on what is meant by “representing the world,” and it is worth unpacking this further. One important aspect of representation is that it does not build in the idea of *successful* hook up with how things are. There are many mental states – imaginings, hallucinations, desires, false beliefs, hopes, etc. – that clearly seem representational, but which don't obviously hook up with something in the world. For example, it seems sensible to say that a false belief can represent the world, as it offers a claim that the world is a certain

¹⁷ I am not here interested in questions about whether certain uses of “content” are legitimate uses (for example, one might wonder whether it makes sense to claim that the physical state of a tree has content in a way that resembles the content of a mental state); I am merely trying to sketch what it means to claim that something has content.

¹⁸ Crane, T. 1992. “The non-conceptual content of experience”, in T. Crane, editor, *The Contents of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 92.

way; it just happens to get things wrong. Similarly, if I imagine something, what I imagine represents the world as being a certain way; a way that the world might have been. In light of this, it is perhaps useful to think of representation in terms of how things are portrayed. On this way of thinking, content represents the world by *portraying* how it is, how it might be, or how it could have been.¹⁹

While it is not the case that content *must* successfully capture how things are, it is crucial that content *can* successfully capture how things are. This can be thought of as a point about the way in which content is normative. As content represents the world as being a certain way, there is *a way* that things are represented, which makes a specific claim about how things are. This representation is correct if things really are that way, and incorrect if not.²⁰ This is sometimes discussed in terms of various conditions, such as correctness conditions, truth conditions, or accuracy conditions.²¹ The normative conditions for any content are simply what must be the case in order for the content to “get things right.” For example, if I believe the wall in front of me is a certain colour, the relevant belief content is related to whether the wall really is that colour; the wall’s actual colour provides a normative constraint for the belief content.

If the point about normativity is added to the general characterisations presented so far, we are in a position to make some claims about what contents have in common.

¹⁹ It might seem that to claim content “represents the world” ignores important questions about what gets represented. The main idea is that content represents *something* as being a certain way; as many participants in the debate over perceptual content talk about “representing the world,” this phrase will be adopted. I will simply note that additional issues concerning what gets represented are tangential to the debate over perceptual content (at least as the debate is being navigated here).

²⁰ The basic idea here is that content must be normative in a very limited sense. Whatever normativity is sufficient to allow for false beliefs, mistaken perceptions, and so on, is all that is being stressed here. The claim that content is normative in a sense stronger than this is an issue that is peripheral to the current discussion, and I will not pursue it here.

²¹ Christopher Peacocke regularly puts things this way, such as in *A Study of Concepts*; Cf. Peacocke, C. 1992a. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

First, contents represent the world. Second, contents do so in a specific way; they present the world as being one way rather than another. Third, contents admit of normativity; they can get things right or wrong. This seems sufficient for a general sketch of the idea of content. In differentiating between types of content, things become less clear, largely because the issues are more contentious. For example, given that it can be argued that perceptual content is just one form of belief content, it may not be possible to describe the theoretical terrain very neatly. Despite the difficulties here, however, it does seem useful to briefly discuss some specific types of content.

Propositional content is one particularly tricky, and important, type of content. To work out what it is typically taken to be, consider the following speech acts:²²

- (1) Adam says “It is snowing.”
- (2) Brian says “It is snowing or it is raining.”
- (3) Charles shouts “Il neige!”

Regardless of which sentence is used, or who is using it, there is something that seems to be common in each case, which can be expressed regardless of the speaker, sentence, language, or mode of expression that is involved. Let α represent the common element that appears in each of the above cases, and let β serve as a content variable for “it is raining.” Making some quick substitutions, we can rewrite the above speech acts as

- (1') Adam says that α .
- (2') Brian says that α or β
- (3') Charles shouts that α

²² Here I offer a somewhat condensed and tweaked version of how Robert Stalnaker develops these ideas. Cf. Stalnaker, R. 1998. “What might nonconceptual content be?”, in Enrique Villanueva, ed., *Concepts. Philosophical Issues* (1998), 9. Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1998.

These substitutions highlight a common element that can be a part of distinct speech acts, which can, among other things, form a declarative sentence {(1) and (1')}, or form part of a disjunctive assertion {(2) and (2')}. This common element, α , helps form the content of each speech act; it does so because of its role in what is being said.

It is important that the same content can be expressed by different people, using different means (languages), and with different force (being said or being shouted). It seems that a similar picture can be sketched with regards to mental content. Just as the content of a speech act can be separated out from both the means used to express it, and the force with which it is expressed, the content of a mental representation can be separated out from the means of representation and the kind of mental state that it is found in. It is possible that you and I might say the same thing, even though one of us says it in French and the other says it in English. Similarly, we also might think the same thing, even though we may represent the thoughts differently. It is also possible that I might say what you shout, and similarly, I might believe what you are uncertain about, but hope for. While in the one case we have a distinction between speech acts and their contents, in the mental case, we have a distinction between mental states and their contents.

It is sometimes argued that commonalities between thoughts, sentences, and utterances – like the ones described above – involve relations to a common entity, which is often construed as abstract and mind independent. An entity of this sort is known as a proposition. Propositions are often taken to be bearers of truth or falsity. Due to this, one might argue that propositions have truth values as their normative conditions.²³ If these views about propositions are endorsed, propositional content, then, is content that can be

²³ This should be read in the sense of “normative condition” developed earlier in this section.

true or false. If we claim a belief state has propositional content, for example, this means that the belief state has a propositionally structured content which conveys something to its believer, with truth conditions providing the relevant content with normativity.

It is debatable whether propositional content is the best way of explaining what is going on regarding all mental content. Initial concerns may arise due to uneasiness with positing abstract objects. For those comfortable with abstract objects, the link to truth conditions sketched above may still seem problematic. A sentence like “the cat is on the mat” says that something is the case; in this instance, it says that the cat is on the mat. If the cat is actually on the mat, then the sentence is true; if the cat isn’t, then the sentence is false. While this seems to cohere well with the way in which it seems belief states are normative, other mental states don’t seem to have truth conditions. For examples, desires seem to have satisfaction conditions, rather than truth conditions. Similarly, it can be argued that perceptions have accuracy conditions, which are distinct from truth conditions. While it is possible to argue that all correctness conditions ultimately reduce to truth conditions, a reduction of this sort is a very substantive claim. Here, I only wish to highlight that insofar as someone doesn’t think that all mental states have contents whose normativity is based in truth conditions, it is desirable to resist the idea that all mental content must be propositional.

Having looked at content at a general level, and the idea of propositional content, there are some questions that remain which are specific to perceptual content. For example, what general features does it have? To answer this question, it seems sufficient, at least for now, to recall some of the main points that were previously developed about perceptual experiences. To summarize these points, “perceptual content”, as the term is

being used here, refers to something which represents the world as being a certain way, and which can get things right or wrong, while being based in normal perceptual processes that underpin a mental state with phenomenal character.

As a final point about content more generally, it should be noted that it is a substantive view about content to base the idea in the language of information and representation. The view developed so far has held that content is, primarily, whatever can be conveyed to something (typically a subject) by something (such as a mental state or speech act). On this sort of view about content, the term “content” is read similarly to its occurrences in phrases like “the contents of the newspaper,” or “the contents of the movie.” This is to be distinguished from the use of “content” in phrases like “the contents of a bucket.” On a bucket-like view, the content of a perceptual experience would be the objects, properties, and/or relations that the experience contains in some way; here, the language of containment is meant to be literal. There are some views about perceptual content that lend themselves to a bucket-like reading; for instance, certain sense data views might be best read as arguing that there are certain objects, sense datum, that are contained in a given act of perception (making up the contents of that perceptual state). In contemporary debates, however, it seems clear that the newspaper-like view is widespread, and in what follows “perceptual content” should always be read this way. With the above reflections on the content of perceptual experience in mind, we can now turn to a more specific issue; what does it mean to claim that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual?

1.4) Conceptual Content

The idea that content is conceptual can be framed in various ways. One way that seems particularly helpful is the idea of structured content. To say that content has structure is just to say that there are certain things which are essential to a particular content carrying information in the way that it does.²⁴ An unstructured content, by contrast, would simply present its information; it would be as if the information arrives in a brute form, which can't be analyzed further. If content is structured conceptually, then, this means that there are conceptual factors that are essential to certain contents being what they are. Note here that the structure issue is at the level of how the information is carried in making up the content itself; it doesn't matter if conceptual resources are very closely related to the content in some way. In order to be genuinely conceptually structured, concepts have to make the content what it is, rather than merely be correctly applicable to the content.

To proceed further, we need to work out what it means to say that something is conceptual. While views about the conceptual do vary, there are some that are more widely accepted than others. One of the most widely accepted views is that conceptual contents are subject to what Gareth Evans calls a "generality constraint".²⁵ It is possible to present an Evans-style generality constraint in many forms, but it is most naturally suited to thought content, and here a version shall be provided that focuses on thoughts

Generality Constraint: If a thinker, *s*, can have the thoughts that *a* is *F* and that *b* is

G, *s* can also think that *a* is *G* and that *b* is *F* (if *s* understands *F*_{*a*} and *G*_{*b*}, *s* also

²⁴ The details here are highly debatable. For example, is structure a matter of various elements, or basic building blocks, being arranged in a certain way? Some might argue that this is mistaken, and that structure consists of cognitive abilities operating in a certain way (Cf. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, *op cit*, p. 102). However, these issues are secondary at the moment, and won't be pursued.

²⁵ The Generality Constraint is developed in Evans, *ibid.*, p. 102-105.

could understand Fb and Gb).

The generality constraint is an ideal, which is meant to apply widely, although not in a fully sweeping way. After all, certain thoughts are simply nonsense, and might not admit of understanding.²⁶ The basic idea, though, does seem compelling. All it states is that most concepts, in order to be concepts at all, must be generalizable beyond the context in which we first encounter them. For example, if I have the concept of “red,” and can understand the thought that my bike is red, I should be able to understand the thought that my house is red, that the sky is red, and so on. Similarly, if I believe that Eric studies engineering and Chris studies computing, it should be within my capacity to believe that Chris studies engineering and Eric studies computing. While adhering to the generality constraint doesn’t necessarily guarantee that we have a conceptual content, failing to adhere to this constraint, in most cases, suggests that we don’t.

Loosely related to the idea of generality is the idea that conceptual contents possess an inferential structure. “Inferential structure” simply means that the relevant contents are directly accessible in inferences. For example, consider the following thought contents: “All smurfs are blue,” and “Papa Smurf is a smurf.” From these two contents we can infer that “Papa Smurf is blue,” given that certain logical rules are endorsed in the background. Inferences like these can only be performed on contents which possess sufficient transparency (in that the contents exhibit logical form and can be neatly broken down into relevant elements when required), and which involve enough generality to admit of inference.

²⁶ It is notable, however, that humans can be highly creative when it comes to metaphorical combinations of ideas. While it might seem odd to claim that a wall is loud or that a voice is purple, with some explanation, these expressions can be meaningful.

While there are many other marks of the conceptual that are worth discussion, the ideas of generality and inferential structure seem as central as any other.²⁷ What does it mean to apply features like these to perceptual content? To address this question, an indirect strategy will be adopted; a form of belief conceptualism will be presented – the view that beliefs have conceptual content – and a parallel view about experience conceptualism will be sketched. The term “experiential content” will emerge here to eliminate some formulaic awkwardness; it should be read the same way as “perceptual content;” at least as I am using the term. Both are simply shorthand for “the content of perceptual experience.”

It is held by several philosophers that beliefs and concepts are related in the following way (belief conceptualism):²⁸

BC: in order for a subject S to believe that x is F, for any property F and object x, S must have concepts of F and x, and must employ those concepts in the belief. The content of a belief is said to be conceptual, on this view, only if concepts structure beliefs in this way. Furthermore, it is argued, we have reason to think that concepts in fact provide beliefs with this kind of structure. One way of defending belief conceptualism is by suggesting that it explains how beliefs differ in the content that they have. It is possible for Tony to believe that the large piece of furniture in the corner of the room is ugly, without believing that the sofa in the corner of the room is ugly, even though the large piece of furniture in the corner of the room is a sofa.²⁹ The relevant

²⁷ Compositionality and reference determinacy are examples of two other major marks of the conceptual. The idea of reference determinacy, in the form of recognition, will be invoked in chapter three.

²⁸ For a discussion of this sort of view, see Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, *op cit*.

²⁹ This point, and the ones that follow, all depend on what is involved in possessing concepts like *sofa*. As I am simply offering a sample consideration in favour of belief conceptualism, and am not overly concerned with defending belief conceptualism, I will not pursue these issues here.

beliefs, despite being about the same physical object, differ in that the thinker uses different concepts to capture what is being claimed. Belief conceptualism also explains why some thinkers can't have certain beliefs. If Tony lacks the concept "sofa," he can't believe that *sofas* are too heavy, or very expensive, or anything else about *sofas*. According to belief conceptualism, this is simply because Tony doesn't have the required concept to form those beliefs. While a full defence of belief conceptualism requires much more than this, the basic idea seems fairly straightforward.

Without taking a stance on the merits of belief conceptualism, one way of formulating experience conceptualism is to simply produce a parallel account to belief conceptualism. If we do this, the result is the following:

EC: in order for a subject S to experience that x is F, for any property F and object x, S must have concepts of F and x, and must employ those concepts in the experience.

The language of employment, used in both cases, is a bit idiosyncratic; it is much more common to talk about deploying concepts, rather than employing them. At the risk of sounding odd, the language of employment seems preferable, as it leaves it an open question how the relevant concepts come into play. In order for a subject to employ a concept in the above cases, the concept simply needs to structure the content. It's not necessary, for example, that the subject actively brings a concept to bear on what it is that they believe or experience (as the language of deployment suggests). It is possible that the relevant conceptual resources are passively drawn upon at the appropriate times.³⁰

³⁰ This possibility is essential to John McDowell's position in *Mind and World, op cit.* (for example, see p. 28)

In order to be clear about what experience conceptualism amounts to, in addition to the above points about generality and openness to inferences, more can be said about what it means to employ concepts in an experience. There are some basic skills of discrimination that seem central. The most minimal requirement for employing a concept of Fs is being able to discriminate things that are F from things which are not F. A stricter requirement insists that the thinker must have an appreciation of why something counts as an F, and why a purported not-F doesn't count. An even stricter requirement is that the thinker must be able to justify and defend their judgement that something is an F, or that something is not an F. Differences in the requirements on the thinker, as described here, can clearly affect whether a given content gets counted as conceptually structured or not.

1.5) Nonconceptual Content

In the above section, a definition for conceptual experiential content was offered, which basically states the following: S can only experience F of x if S has concepts for both F and x, and employs them in the experience. On the basis of this picture, an experiential content is nonconceptual if either

- i) S can not or does not possess a concept for F or x
- ii) S possesses a concept for F and x, but cannot or does not employ both concepts (and perhaps employs neither).

It seems then that there are different senses to the claim that the content of perceptual experience is nonconceptual. What these different senses have in common is that in each case, the subject has an experience, without employing the concepts that would apply to

what is being experienced. In many cases, this is a matter of not even possessing the relevant concepts. In all cases, whatever can be said about how the content is structured, the content isn't conceptually structure, because the required concepts are either not possessed by the subject, or simply don't play a role in making the experience what it is. One way of summarizing all of this is as follows: content is nonconceptual if and only if the subject *doesn't need to possess* the concepts required to properly articulate the content.³¹

It should be recognized, at this stage, that there may be no unitary notion of nonconceptual content. In addition to the ways in which a perceptual content might fail to be conceptual, there are other domains in which nonconceptual contents are posited.³² A concrete proposal that describes the structure of nonconceptual content that seems appropriate in one case might fail to be appropriate in another case. This shouldn't be seen as a slight against nonconceptual content, but merely as a reflection of the complexity of the notion. Concrete proposals regarding nonconceptual content are very important, and their importance needs to be stressed. While it is interesting to find that there are good reasons to think that certain contents aren't structured conceptually, unless we have some alternative view to how those contents actually are structured (using

³¹ The point here is not that concepts are necessarily *needed* to properly articulate perceptual contents (after all, nonconceptualism is the explicit denial of this). The idea here is simply that concepts *can* articulate perceptual contents; the content of a perceptual experience can be put into conceptual form. Now, if in order to have the experience, the subject *must* have the concepts needed to articulate the content in a conceptual form, then it seems the experience is itself conceptual all the way down (in other words, there is no reason to think that the experience arrives in a form that isn't conceptual). However, if in order to have the experience, the subject *does not need* to possess the concepts required to articulate the content in its conceptual form, then concepts do not appear to play an essential role in forming the experience itself.

³² Much has been written about the potential nonconceptuality of subpersonal states, as well as infant and animal cognition. In information theory more generally, if it is legitimate to speak of inorganic objects as having content, then such content would be nonconceptual (for instance, if my chair has content, then it would probably be some kind of nonconceptual content, as it is quite likely that my chair doesn't possess concepts).

nonconceptual resources), then it may remain mysterious just what the nonconceptual claims amount to.

One of the most widely discussed proposal for nonconceptual content is scenario content, which is developed and defended by Christopher Peacocke.³³ The basic idea here is that the content of a perceptual experience consists of a scenario. A scenario is primarily made up of a spatial type, which is a way of filling out the space around a perceiver. The spatial type must be consistent with the correctness of whatever it is that is being perceived. For example, if I'm looking at a bookshelf, there will be a spatial type that corresponds to how the bookshelf and its contents are arranged. To correctly reflect what is being experienced, spatial types also need to be positioned relative to the perceiver (in would be inaccurate, for example, to characterise my visual experience of the bookshelf in terms of a spatial type which maps onto the bookshelf, but which is turned on a ninety degree angle to the left). In order to position spatial types, it is necessary to fix an origin and axes. For a visual experience, it might seem appropriate to fix the center of the chest as the origin, with the directions up/down, left/right, and back/front as the axes.

Scenario content is highly complex and detailed (as is Peacocke's account of it); in order to properly characterise a spatial type, it is necessary to fill it with all and only the information that is contained in a particular experience. Furthermore, as spatial types are nonconceptual, it isn't required that the perceiver has concepts that adequately cover all the details present in the relevant spatial type. Despite the fact that concepts are

³³ Scenario Content is discussed at length in several papers by Peacocke. For an especially focused discussion, see Peacocke, C. 1992b. "Scenarios, concepts, and perception", in T. Crane, editor, *The Contents of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

required to describe these details, a spatial type can structure an experience without the subject employing concepts that capture the spatial type. It is possible to raise doubts about many aspects of scenario content; however, I do not wish to navigate those issues here. Scenario content is simply being offered as an example of one account regarding what it means to claim that perceptual experiences have a nonconceptual structure.

According to conceptualists like McDowell and Brewer, the idea of nonconceptual content is largely a non-starter; something like scenario content simply couldn't constitute the content of perceptual experience. This is because they don't think that a perceptual content could fail to have a conceptual structure, and still play the role that it appears to in epistemology. In particular, it doesn't seem that nonconceptually structured contents could properly justify any thoughts that seem to be based on them. In the next chapter, some of the main arguments offered by the conceptualists, and various responses that are amenable to nonconceptualism, will be examined at length.

Chapter 2

Conceptualism and Rationality

2.1) Conceptualism in General

The doctrine of conceptualism is summed up in Kant's slogan that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."³⁴ As Kantian intuitions are, roughly, bits of experiential uptake, Kant is often interpreted as claiming that experiences require conceptual involvement in order to be genuine experiences at all. In what follows, little attention will be paid to Kant's actual views regarding any of this. However, the general Kantian point – that experiences need to be themselves conceptual – remains at the heart of conceptualist views regarding experience.

There is a sense in which nonconceptualists agree that experience is conceptual. After all, unless experiences are related in some way to concepts, it is hard to make sense of many ordinary thoughts. For example, we are able to describe our experiences, and doing this requires some kind of connection between concepts and experience; consider sentences like "I see a chair." The point of contention between nonconceptualists and conceptualists is *how* conceptual capacities play a role in perception. One way of framing the key difference is that for nonconceptualists, while concepts normally do get applied to whatever constitutes the actual experiences, concepts don't actually structure the experience. As Millar has written, "the role of conceptual capacities in perception is

³⁴ Kant, I. 1929. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith. London: MacMillan, p. 93, A51/B76. The wider passage is as follows: "If the *receptivity* of our mind, its power of receiving representations in so far as it is in any wise affected, is to be entitled sensibility, then the mind's power of producing representations from itself, the *spontaneity* of knowledge, should be called the understanding. Our nature is so constituted that our *intuition* can never be other than sensible; that is, it contains only the mode in which we are affected by objects. The faculty, on the other hand, which enables us to *think* the object of sensible intuition is the understanding. To neither of these powers may a preference be given over the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."

to extract information from experiences in a form in which it can be stored and retrieved and fed into our thinking. It is not to form the experiences themselves.”³⁵ While Millar does not clearly make this point on behalf of nonconceptualism, his way of putting things reflects a typical nonconceptualist model. On this model, experiences are not yet conceptualized, and become conceptualized if they are thought about in certain ways. Conceptualists reject the idea that concepts are distanced in this way from actual experiences.

A highly influential argument for conceptualism focuses on the role of perceptual experiences in rational thought. While the argument can be cast in different forms, it is often presented in terms of our beliefs. To begin, it is clear that we can have beliefs that are caused by our perceptual experiences; for example, I might believe there is a dog in the room because I see it. It also seems that I can be rationally justified in holding certain beliefs because of what I have experienced; I might cite seeing a dog as a reason for believing it is there. However, unless perceptual experiences are capable of providing reasons of the right sort, reasons that can be justificatory, there is a worry that beliefs dependent on perception would never be justified. Furthermore, in order to provide reasons of the right sort, various considerations suggest that experience requires conceptual content. If the arguments for these views are convincing, conceptualism emerges as the only sensible option, since if it weren't true, our very status as rational beings – at least when it comes to relying on perceptual experience in navigating the world around us – would be at best mysterious, and at worst an illusion.

Much of the debate regarding this sort of argument hinges on various claims about rationality, reasons, and justification. However, rather than take on these issues directly,

³⁵ Millar, “Concepts, Experience, and Inference,” *op cit.*, p. 496

and then try to sort out whether a conceptualist view is compelling, the approach here will be to turn to how conceptualists themselves have presented their views. McDowell is perhaps the leading contemporary advocate of conceptualism, and working through his presentation of the issues is a good place to start.

2.2) The Scope of the Conceptual

One way to approach McDowell's views is to begin with a general worry about how thought succeeds in being directed at the world. The worry is that we need to receive something from the world, which is not produced solely by our minds, in order to be confident we are in contact with it.³⁶ This worry, for McDowell, motivates a minimal empiricism; our thoughts about the world must be somehow justified by the world itself. However, if our thoughts about the world are really to be our own, there must be a sense in which we are responsible for the judgments that we make. It doesn't seem like the judgments we make are simply forced upon us; some rational activity, which is under the control of the thinker (in some sense), seems essential.³⁷

One way to respect the need for a minimal empiricism is to postulate that in experience, something is "given" which plays a foundational role in thought. Via the Given, in McDowell's words, "empirical substance is transmitted from the ground level to empirical concepts that are further removed from immediate experience, with the transmission running along channels constituted by inferential linkages that hold a system

³⁶ This can be thought of, like McDowell often puts it, as a Kantian worry about *receptivity*.

³⁷ This can be thought of as a Kantian worry about *spontaneity*.

of concepts together.”³⁸ Unfortunately, regardless of how we attempt to develop a theory involving something that is given, McDowell thinks the very idea of the Given is a myth.

That the Given is a myth is the conclusion of a second line of reasoning that McDowell takes to be central. The argument here begins by noting that reasoning takes place in a normative context; we might follow Sellars, as McDowell does, and call the required context the logical space of reasons.³⁹ In contrast to this, natural-scientific theories do not posit objects within a space of reasons, but within a realm of law; for example, according to the laws of motion, bodies do not physically move because they have reasons to do so, but because forces are acting upon them, causing them to move as they do. If we think of nature as the world of natural-scientific description – the logical space of nature – it seems that empirical input from the world fits into this logical space. This means that the Given would be part of the logical space of nature, in order to legitimately ground thought in the world, as well as the logical space of reasons, as it provides reasons for having certain thoughts. However, if we accept a true dichotomy of logical spaces, this seems impossible.

How are we to resolve the above tension? One option, that McDowell rejects, is to give up on minimal empiricism. The position that results, if we do this, is coherentism. For coherentists of the sort McDowell has in mind, our beliefs are only justified by our other beliefs, and receive merely causal influence from outside the web of beliefs itself; this approach, however, fails to rationally ground thought in an external world. Another option is to deny that the dichotomy of logical spaces is legitimate. If we extend either

³⁸ McDowell, *Mind and World*, *op cit.* , p. 7

³⁹ Cf. Sellars, W. 1956. “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, in H. Feigl and M. Scriven, eds, *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 253-329

logical space to cover all of thought, then the problem dissolves. This strategy would involve a reduction of one logical space to the other; what McDowell calls “bald naturalism” is an example of this. McDowell, however, wants to uphold our intuitions that the logical spaces are distinctive. This produces an apparent antinomy; thought requires something “given” to rationally connect us to the world, but this is impossible, and it’s hard to see how else we could have a rational connection of the required sort. It seems, then, that we both need a rational connection between thought and the world, and simply can’t have that kind of connection.

McDowell’s solution to the apparent antinomy is to shift how the dichotomy of logical spaces is construed. While there is a genuine dichotomy between the space of reasons and the space of natural-scientific explanation, this does not, according to McDowell, map onto the dichotomy of the normative and the natural. This is because nature includes human beings, who have a second nature, which involves rationality and develops in accordance with fully natural processes. The natural world, since humans are a part of it, must be both a realm of law, and a realm of rationality; in other words, nature bridges the dichotomy of logical spaces. How is this possible?

It is in answering this question that the content of perceptual experience, for McDowell, acquires a prominent position. In McDowell’s own words:

“In a particular experience where one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement: it becomes the content of a judgement if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is a conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are. Thus the idea of conceptually structured operations of receptivity puts us in a position to speak of experience as openness to the layout of reality. Experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ McDowell, *Mind and World*, *op cit.*, p. 26

The main idea here is not that we have found an acceptable version of the Given, but rather, that we can respect a minimal empiricism, without needing the Given.

One way to unpack the ideas offered in the above passage is to think in terms of the scope being given to conceptual resources. To begin, we have the idea that in perceptual experience, we have receptivity; information – *that things are thus and so* – is received from the world. This information, or the content of the experience, is also directly available for judgment; we need this to ensure we have a rational connection between external reality and thought. The type of content available for judgement, however, is the same type of content that is available for belief. As belief content is conceptual, we are now committed to the view that the content of perceptual experience is also conceptual.⁴¹ The scope of the conceptual must extend all the way out to the edges of perceptual experience, to ensure that we have rational links connecting the world, perceptual experience, and thought.

Being conceptual, for McDowell, is a fairly demanding requirement. For McDowell, “it is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials.”⁴² The idea of active thinking is often put in terms of the Kantian notion of *spontaneity*. Spontaneity is taken to characterise exercises of conceptual capacities in general, and such exercises are thought to involve free, rational, access on the part of the

⁴¹ While McDowell’s views about belief conceptualism can be found elsewhere, it is implicit in the passage quoted above; his remark “so it is a conceptual content” directly assumes judgment conceptualism, and judgment conceptualism, insofar as judgments can be partially made up of beliefs, requires belief conceptualism.

⁴² McDowell, *Mind and World*, *op cit.*, p. 47

subject.⁴³ In perceptual experience, conceptual contents are produced by an interplay between receptivity and spontaneity; while the content is passively received from outside (it is not itself produced by the subject's thinking), it arrives in a form suitable for spontaneity. In other words, the contents of perceptual experience are not themselves "thought up" by the subject, but they are ready to enter directly into thought.

If we don't endorse conceptual content, McDowell thinks that we simply couldn't account for the rational nature of human beings. This is largely due to the sort of reasons that are required for perceptual experiences to be legitimately justificatory. To see why this is so, it may be helpful to examine what McDowell thinks nonconceptual content would fail to provide. Consider the position presented by Evans, who is usually credited as the first to draw serious attention to the idea of nonconceptual content. For Evans, the content of perceptual experience is nonconceptual, and concepts are involved in making judgments based upon experience. In Evans's words:

"The informational states which a subject acquires through perception are *non-conceptual*, or *non-conceptualized*. Judgements *based upon* such states necessarily involve conceptualization: in moving from perceptual experience to a judgement about the world (usually expressible in some verbal form), one will be exercising basic conceptual skills... The process of conceptualization or judgement takes the subject from 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)."⁴⁴

What is wrong with a view like Evans's?

It can be hard to see that there is anything wrong with saying that a judgment can be rationally justified by nonconceptual information. After all, a perceptual experience, however its content is organized, does seem to provide reasons that explain why certain

⁴³ "Spontaneity" is in many ways just a label for the involvement of conceptual capacities, and it can be read in this way for our purposes here.

⁴⁴ Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, *op cit.*, p. 227

judgments are made. For example, suppose I look at my desk. My visual experience conveys to me that my desk is a certain way (with respect to its visual aspects); this seems right regardless of how the content of the experience is structured. Based on that information, it might seem that my desk is blue. That it seems to me that my desk is blue might even be a *judgment* of mine. Furthermore, in explaining why I made that judgment, I should be able to cite how the desk looked to me. Nonconceptual content, at first glance, seems to provide no barrier to my ability to make judgments.

The problem McDowell sees with nonconceptual content, with regards to justification, is that the reasons based in such content could only be explanatory.⁴⁵ There is a sense in which something can be a “reason why” something else happens, and if I cite my experience as a reason for a certain thought of mine, I might simply be explaining why I have the thought. This possibility is especially clear if we look at things from a third person perspective. If I consider someone else, and try to explain why they make the judgements they do, I might cite their experiences. I might say that Steve judged that the music was loud because it sounded that way to him, and in doing say, suggest that Steve’s experience provided reasons for thinking that the music was loud. However, explanatory reasons in this sense, it seems, fail to ensure a legitimate rational connection between Steve’s judgment and his experience. The link could be purely causal, and while his experience may provide him with exculpations for the judgment he makes, this does not amount to justification. Furthermore, if experiences have nonconceptual content, wouldn’t the “reasons” they provide for belief and judgement be simply causal in this way?

⁴⁵ For an extended discussion of this point, see McDowell, *Mind and World*, *op cit.*, p. 163

There is a difference between explanatory reasons, that tell us why something has happened, and someone's own reasons for believing or judging something. To have a genuinely rational connection between experience and judgement, McDowell suggests, the same sort of reasons that are characteristic of judgments must also be available in experience. In McDowell's language, if the rational relations between experience and judgement "are to be genuinely recognizable as reason-constituting, we cannot confine spontaneity within a boundary across which the relations are supposed to hold. The relations themselves must be able to come under the self-scrutiny of active thinking."⁴⁶ Otherwise, experiences don't really provide "reasons for" believing or judging anything; they simply cause various thoughts, which we can then understand in terms of explanatory reasons.

The distinction between "reasons why" and "reasons for" is one way to unpack what McDowell is worried about. On this general approach, nonconceptual content is unhelpful, because it can't provide a subject with reasons for thinking anything; the content would be opaque in terms of thinking *with* it, rather than simply *about* it. At best, content that is opaque in this way would provide explanatory reasons, that might help us see why a thought formed, but which are of no help in understanding how that thought admits of justification. There is a lot worth exploring in the "reasons" based approach, and it may be worthwhile – to continue to build on the current discussion – to turn to another thinker that emphasises, in a slightly different way, the importance of a subject's own reasons.

⁴⁶ McDowell, *Mind and World*, *op cit.*, p. 53

2.3) Reason and Inference

Brewer presents his views about perceptual content as having similar motivations as McDowell. Like McDowell, Brewer thinks there are some epistemic requirements that must be met in order for empirical thought to be possible at all. Brewer also agrees with McDowell that when we examine what these requirements are, we are forced to conclude that perceptual experiences have conceptual content. There are two general premises that are put forward by Brewer as basic.⁴⁷ First, the most basic empirical beliefs are claimed to have their content due to standing in various relations to perceptual experiences. Second, it is claimed that only reason-giving relations between experiences and beliefs could play this content determining role. Thus, given that we have such beliefs, we can conclude that

“(R) Perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs.”⁴⁸

The general argument Brewer offers that links reasons to experience and belief is by no means obvious, but I will not focus on it here. Rather, I shall examine what happens when Brewer specifically turns to questions regarding the structure of perceptual content.

The central idea Brewer develops is that in order for perceptual experiences to provide reasons for empirical beliefs, the content of perceptual experience must be conceptual. The argument goes as follows:⁴⁹

- 1) Sense experiential states provide reasons for belief.
- 2) Sense experiential states provide reasons for belief only if they have conceptual content.

Therefore,

⁴⁷ These points are discussed in great length in the first half of Brewer, *Perception and Reason*, *op cit.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 18

⁴⁹ Sense experiential states, here, are equivalent to experiential perceptual states

CC) Sense experiential states have conceptual content.

The first premise is just another form of (R). The second premise, however, directly states why it might be thought that the contents of perceptual experience must be conceptual; why should we think that 2) is plausible?

In defence of 2), Brewer offers considerations which are similar to those attributed to McDowell in the previous section. One point that Brewer highlights especially clearly is a connection between reason and inference. As Brewer puts it, “a mental state is *conceptual* if and only if it has a representational content that is characterisable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself must possess and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a premise or the conclusion of a deductive argument, or of an inference of some other kind (e.g. inductive or abductive).”⁵⁰

Brewer’s argument for 2) proceeds in two stages. One stage focuses on how reasons are needed to make inferences, and the other stage focuses on how genuine reasons must be *reasons for* a particular subject; purely explanatory reasons, which are available from a third person point of view, are the wrong kind of reasons here. These two stages will be examined in turn.

First, what does it mean to say that reasons are needed to make inferences? One crucial point is that in order for an inference to be warranted, it needs to be intelligible from the point of view of rationality. This intelligibility involves making explicit why an inference is a good one to make. We can make things explicit, in the needed ways, only if the premises and conclusions involved in the inference are clear to us. The sort of clarity needed, Brewer suggests, is best exhibited by propositions. Furthermore, once we need propositions to evaluate an inference, then it seems we are working with concepts,

⁵⁰ Brewer, *Perception and Reason, op cit.*, p. 149

due to considerations of the sort discussed in the first chapter. The upshot of all of this, for Brewer, is that in order for the contents of perceptual experience to contribute to inferences, they would need to have conceptual contents.

It might be objected that a perceptual content could contribute to an inference, if we consider the content from an outside point of view. On this approach, concepts apply to the content, and hence allow us to see how the content can provide reasons for inferences, but this doesn't require the content is itself conceptual. However, Brewer emphasises that this kind of approach doesn't do justice to how reasoning actually occurs, and the worry here is reflected in the second stage of his argument. According to this stage, when I am engaged in a process of reasoning about something, I must be in a position to entertain the reasons in light of which I think or do what I think or do. In justifying a conclusion that I've arrived at, I can only offer reasons that I'm able to actually think of; if I can't think of those reasons, then they couldn't actually be part of my reasoning, as it manifests itself to me. If perceptual experiences are to be relevant to a subject's own reasoning, then, in light of the first stage of the argument, it seems perceptual content must be conceptual.

If McDowell and Brewer are correct, in general, then there is no theoretical room for the possibility of nonconceptual content. This is because according to their arguments, if perceptual experience isn't conceptually structured, it would be impossible to reason using the deliverances of experience. We would still be able to reason *about* experience, but experience itself would not provide any kind of rational connection to the external world. One way to challenge conceptualism, against epistemic arguments of the sort offered by McDowell and Brewer, is to question whether perceptual content really

needs to be conceptual to provide subjects with a rational link to the world. A second approach is to question whether the type of rational connection that conceptualists wish to preserve is really needed to develop a satisfactory picture of the relation between mind and world. Both of these approaches will be explored in the next section. While it will be argued that there is indeed some room available – despite what McDowell and Brewer argue – for perceptual experience to have nonconceptual content, the reasons for thinking this greatly affect the significance of the claim. These issues will be taken up in the next section.

2.4) Two Questions Concerning Rational Justification

Conceptualism about perceptual content, and the arguments just described in favour of it, can be challenged in many ways; here are two to which I want to draw attention. First, does rational justification actually depend upon a subject possessing reasons which they can actively entertain and which rely upon conceptual capacities to enter into thought? Second, do we even need rational justification in the context of perceptual experience?⁵¹

One way to present the first question is to ask whether there are alternative models of rational justification which are plausible, and which don't rely upon the idea of conceptual content. A central part of Brewer's argument for conceptual content is that perceptual experiences need to stand in inferential relations with beliefs, and that this suggests that perceptual experiences have a conceptual structure. Peacocke has objected to this motivation for experience conceptualism, on the grounds that accuracy conditions

⁵¹ It should be emphasised that it is not always easy to neatly place various arguments against McDowell and Brewer into either major category offered here. However, as long as this is kept in mind, it should be useful to proceed in this way.

allow experiences to stand in inferential relations with beliefs, and perceptual experiences can have accuracy conditions even if experience conceptualism is false.⁵² If Peacocke is right, we don't have to follow Brewer in linking reasons so closely to conceptual contents, and we may have good reasons for resisting the conclusion that perceptual content must be conceptual.

According to Peacocke, in order for perceptual content to be representational, what is essential is that it has accuracy conditions. This is because in order for an experience to convey to a subject that the world is a certain way, there must be a particular way that the world either is, or isn't; if the experience maps on to how things are, then it "gets things right". In the case of experience, getting things right is a matter of whether a perceptual experience accurately represents the world or not.

Peacocke argues that once the idea of accuracy conditions is in play, this is sufficient to ensure that perceptual contents (whether conceptually structured or not) can provide reasons for belief. Consider the following passage from Peacocke:

"a thinker can ask, 'is something's looking that way a reason for judging that it's square', for instance. On the approach I advocate, 'that way,' in this particular occurrence, refers demonstratively to a way in which something can be perceived. The reference itself is made by something conceptual: demonstrative concepts can enter conceptual contents. There is no requirement that the reference of the demonstrative be conceptualized."⁵³

It may be a little bit obscure what any of this has to do with accuracy conditions. We can get there fairly quickly, however. The main point being made in the quoted passage is that perceptual experience can provide reasons for thought, and do so at a distance; it is

⁵² See Peacocke, "Does perception have a nonconceptual content?", *op cit.* A similar main point is offered in Heck, "Nonconceptual content and the 'space of reasons'" *op cit.* In *Reasons and Experience*, *op cit.*, Millar is not explicitly focused on the conceptualism issue, but develops an extremely detailed account of how experiences justify beliefs without requiring the experiences themselves to be conceptual.

⁵³ Peacocke "Does perception have a nonconceptual content?", *op cit.*, p. 255-256

not required for the experience to itself constitute a reason. While Peacocke doesn't organize his points in the following way, it seems that in making a judgement based on perceptual experience, we are in good shape as long as:

- a) the judgment has conceptual content
- b) the reason supporting, or justifying the judgment can have a conceptual form
- c) the reason is based on something with an accuracy condition (to ensure that it is actually reflecting *something* conveyed by experience)

For Peacocke's model to be acceptable for conceptualists, it needs to ensure that perceptual experience is a legitimate, reason providing, process of justification. If we can provide reasons with conceptual form at the level of thought, and have a clear connection between reasons and experience, then it wouldn't be necessary for there to be a conceptual structure all the way down.

If we examine c) closely, however, there seem to be obvious moves available to conceptualists.⁵⁴ For example, consider the ways in which the reason could be based on something with an accuracy condition. This could be a matter of the reason being caused by the accuracy laden entity, in which case, we seem stuck with a merely causal link of the sort that conceptualists are unhappy with. Alternatively, the reason could be inferentially linked to the accuracy laden entity, and if the general line of thought advanced by McDowell and Brewer is persuasive, then the accuracy laden entity would need to be conceptual in the appropriate ways. While there may be other ways of understanding the "based on" relation relied upon by Peacocke, these two seem most prominent. If we pursue the option of endorsing a mere causal link, then it seems we are

⁵⁴ McDowell discusses Peacocke's work, and a model very similar to the one presented here, in *Mind and World*, op cit., p. 162-174. Unsurprisingly, McDowell is not convinced that an approach like Peacocke's has any hope of success.

giving up on the idea of rational justification, at least of the sort that conceptualists think we need. This option will be discussed shortly. However, it may be possible to construe inferential linkage in a way that retains a rich sense of rational justification, without requiring a sweeping role for conceptual content.

The rich notion of rational justification used by Brewer, and also by McDowell, involves some kind of genuineness requirement. They both emphasise that in order to ensure that perceptual experience provides reasons of the right sort, we need perceptual content to, more or less, directly enter into inferences. While in general, the overall line of argument on behalf of conceptualism seems fairly solid here, it is possible to question it in various ways. For instance, is a causal link between perceptual content and thoughts based on that content actually deficient from the stand point of rational justifications?

The worry I have in mind is whether it makes sense to think that there is something that gets lost in the following situation. Suppose we adopt a model like Peacocke's that makes it clear that perceptual contents are nonconceptual, but have normative conditions they are answerable too. Let P be a perceptual content of this sort, and imagine that P, while not a conceptual content, can be routinely conceptualized into Q. Let Q be a belief content that simply endorses P (or more precisely, what P gets transformed into). Now, the processes linking P to Q are causal, and are not really open to rational scrutiny on the part of the subject. However, while this is true, if Q reliably reflects P (as it should in normal cases), then what relevant problems arise due to invoking Q in rational thought, rather than P itself?

McDowell and Brewer both seem quite right that any attempt to fit P directly into a model of rational justification is not going to work. If P is fitted in indirectly, however,

via Q, it seems arbitrary to insist that P is no longer involved in genuine rational justifications. In order for Q to do the work it needs to here, it does need to meet various conditions. First, Q would need to be a genuine representative of P, but as long as the process of conceptualization works properly, then we have no reason to doubt this.⁵⁵ Second, Q would need to be able to enter into inferences, but since it is a belief content, it can do this easily. Third, Q needs to be assessable by the subject in terms of its rational credentials, but there seem to be no barriers to this. In other words, Q seems perfectly capable of being a “reason for,” that a subject can cite in explaining why a judgment is warranted from the perspective of rationality.

It may still be insisted, on behalf of conceptualism, that we could only ever be exculpated for believing Q, and never properly justified. Perhaps the main issue is whether we can really be confident that Q is rationally assessable by its subject. As long as it seems plausible that Q is assessable, and that the subject of Q is typically responsible for endorsing Q, then it is hard to see why an indirect strategy is deficient. Furthermore, if an indirect strategy is plausible, then there is room to resist conceptualism, while retaining the idea that perceptual content is acceptably involved in rational justification. However, even if the indirect approach is thought to be of no help, there is still a second option available for defenders of nonconceptualism. Why not simply concede that perceptual experience does not provide rational justifications?

Earlier in this chapter, McDowell’s views regarding the need for rational justification were presented at length, and within his way of thinking, it is not easy to see how to resist his general conclusion. However, there are many competing ways of

⁵⁵ The main point here is just that in cases of normal perceptual experiences, and thoughts that emerge from those experiences, it should be alright to assume that there will be certain thoughts which do reflect the content of the experiences.

thinking, which McDowell points out, in which there are no obvious barriers to the idea that perceptual content is nonconceptual. These alternative ways of thinking can be divided up into those that deny the need for a minimal empiricism, and those that deny that there are truly distinctive logical spaces in the ways he insists.

Starting with the issue of minimal empiricism – the question of whether experience must provide reasons for belief – there are views which deny that this is really required. As mentioned briefly above, according to coherentism, beliefs are always justified by other beliefs, and only receive *causal* impact from the outside; there is no question of an overall web of beliefs being *rationally* grounded in anything outside itself. Conceptualists are unhappy with this kind of view; In McDowell’s words, regarding Davidson’s coherentism, “we should be suspicious of his bland confidence that empirical content can be intelligibly in our picture even though we carefully stipulate that the world’s impacts on our senses have nothing to do with justification.”⁵⁶ McDowell might be right here, and while he forcefully argues against pursuing an option like coherentism, defenders of nonconceptualism should keep this kind of view in mind.⁵⁷

Another common way to achieve distance from McDowell’s concerns is to deny the distinctiveness of the logical space of reasons. This route is often adopted by physicalists; in particular, most forms of reductive physicalism claim that our processes of reasoning are thoroughly grounded in the realm of law. As with coherentism, McDowell does offer many powerful arguments here, but it is worth acknowledging that there are some obvious routes which can be pursued that are open to nonconceptualism.

⁵⁶ McDowell, *Mind and World*, op cit., p. 15

⁵⁷ I don’t here mean to dodge McDowell’s criticisms of coherentism, but simply am highlighting where a view like coherentism can enter into the current debate.

The main point here – which has hopefully become clear – is that despite some fairly powerful arguments advanced on behalf of conceptualism, we would be remiss to simply rule out the idea that perceptual experience might have nonconceptual content. As suggested above, there are some prominent views in both epistemology and philosophy of mind – such as coherentism, and reductive physicalism – which provide no obvious barrier to nonconceptual content. Furthermore, even for someone who wants to retain a close link between perceptual experience and judgment, there are some options that appear open here. For example, an indirect strategy of the sort discussed above seems promising, especially if it can be highly developed through an approach such as Peacocke's. These considerations are clearly not conclusive, and don't necessarily mean that we should endorse nonconceptual content, but simply that we should view nonconceptual content as a live option. Pursuing that option will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

A Case for Nonconceptualism

3.1) Some Observations about Perceptual Experience

When a perceptual experience occurs, information is provided to the subject who has the experience. This is simply a consequence of what it means to have a perceptual experience, as described in the first chapter. If we look at some general aspects of how information is made available through perceptual experience – and how those aspects reflect conceptual involvement – we may gain insight into how perceptual content is structured. There are several observations, along these lines, which have been presented on behalf of nonconceptualism about perceptual content. Furthermore, by developing and working through some of the most prominent arguments of this sort which have been advanced in the philosophical literature, it seems that a fairly strong case for nonconceptualism can be made.

In developing a case for nonconceptualism, the approach here will be to start with a fairly general observation about perceptual experience, and then move to more precise versions of what is essentially one central observation. The central observation is that perceptual experience, understood along the lines presented in the first chapter, outstrips what human conceptual capacities could possibly handle. This observation is sometimes presented as reflecting how experience contains a richness of information, which due to human cognitive limitations, couldn't be captured by conceptual capacities. While this view has several strengths, it has an empirical slant that complicates things, as well as theoretical background that is especially contentious. A closely related claim -- that experience presents information which is too fine-grained to be conceptually packaged –

appears capable of distancing itself from certain empirical and theoretical issues.

Fineness of grain is a highly complex issue, and while very interesting, there are reasons to think that it misses some key aspects of experience. These aspects are more adequately reflected by arguments that perceptual experience outstrips conceptual capacities due to the situation dependency of experience. The observations at the heart of situation dependency will be cast in terms of how experiences are textured. While richness of information, fineness of grain, and situation dependency will all be discussed at length, the situation dependency of experience will be presented as providing the strongest support for nonconceptualism.

Closely related to the idea that perceptual experiences outstrip conceptual capacities is the idea that experiences themselves, as experiences, are not the right sort of thing to directly enter into inferences. However, as touched upon in the previous chapter, this might not preclude experiences from robustly contributing to inferences that we do make. Before moving to some general points about experience and belief, however, there is a great deal of work to do in order to motivate any concrete proposals that incorporate some kind of nonconceptual content. Why should we think that experience outstrips conceptual capacities?

3.2) Richness of Information

Richness of Information arguments – at least of the sort being examined here – are presented powerfully in the work of Fred Dretske.⁵⁸ According to Dretske, it is a mistake to think that seeing and hearing are forms of knowing, and that there is a

⁵⁸ This section will focus on the position developed in Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, *op cit.*

relatively seamless transition between perception and associated beliefs. This is a mistake, for Dretske, because perceptual experiences provide us with so much information. The information provided is rich to the extent that it would be unreasonable to think that our cognitive apparatus could handle it all if it were to arrive in conceptual form. As Dretske puts it, if all our perceptual contents were conceptually structured, we would “require gigantically large storage and retrieval capabilities,”⁵⁹ beyond what human beings actually seem to have. The idea here, then, is not that perceptual content couldn’t have a conceptual structure, but that we have reason to think that in practice it doesn’t, because humans are too limited in the amount of information that could be available for thought at the same time.

In order to explain why he thinks information is too rich in the sense he means, Dretske presents a distinction between analogue and digital ways of encoding information in a structure. It is important to note that the information being focused on, for Dretske, is in the form of facts.⁶⁰ For example, if a structure encodes the information that x is F, Dretske thinks that there are two different ways that it can do so, and that how the information is encoded tells us a lot about the type of structure that is required. It should also be noted that while this distinction is related to what we mean when we say a watch is digital as opposed to analogue, Dretske offers it as a technical distinction, and it is important to focus on what he specifically has in mind.

“I will say that a signal (structure, event, state) carries the information that s is F in digital form if and only if the signal carries no additional information about s, no information that is not already nested in s’s being F. If the signal does carry additional information about s, information that is not nested in s’s being F, then

⁵⁹ Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, *op cit.*, p. 140

⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that both Dretske and McDowell think of content as being made up of facts; however, as will be worked through shortly, this is taken to have vastly different implications.

I shall say that the signal carries this information in analogue form.”⁶¹

To illustrate the difference, Dretske asks us to consider the difference between a statement and a picture. If I tell you “the cup has coffee in it,” this signal tells you that there is a cup, and that it has coffee in it. No additional information is provided about the cup or its contents, so the information is in digital form. You are not told what colour the cup is, what size the cup is, what shape the cup is, how full the cup is, what colour the coffee is, or anything that can’t be directly inferred from the actual statement.⁶²

However, if I inform you that the cup has coffee in it by showing you a picture of the cup, it is impossible to not include additional information about the cup, so the information is in analogue form. The picture tells you that the cup has coffee in it by showing you an object with a certain colour, shape, size, contents, and so on. That what you are seeing is a cup with coffee in it is a piece of digital information that must be separated out from the massive amount of other information present in the picture.

Dretske isn’t arguing that in perceptual experience, regardless of modality, we are faced with a mental picture of sorts, from which we then have to extract information. Even in the case of visual experience, he thinks a picture model can be misleading. The point is that when we have a perceptual experience, in any modality, what we experience is rich in information in the same way that a picture is. If I close my eyes and grab an object on my desk, I might feel that it has a certain shape and size, and conclude that I’ve picked up my pen. However, I will also feel things like the temperature of the object, whether the surface of the object is smooth or rough, and a large number of other things,

⁶¹ Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, *op cit.*, p. 136

⁶² For example, it might be argued that from the statement “the cup has coffee in it,” you can infer that “something has coffee in it.” Inferences like this, however, are by their nature extremely general, and shouldn’t be read – in Dretske’s sense – as *additional* information.

some of which I might not be able to easily articulate to myself. This last point is separate from the main idea here though; the main point is that in an experience, like the tactile experience of holding a pen, we are presented with information that is in analogue form.

The differences between thought and perception become striking if we focus on how knowledge and belief are selective in the way that a statement is. The reason for this is fairly straightforward; knowledge and belief states can be filled out by statements. For example, I can believe that the cup has coffee in it. When I entertain this belief, on Dretske's view, this can simply be seen as me endorsing certain information as true. Similarly, I might know that the cup has coffee in it. In these cases, the information being focused on is in digital form, and needs to be for cognition to do the kind of work it needs to do. If in belief and judgement, we attempt directly to take information in analogue form for input, we would quickly become bogged down by the amount of information that would be present in most cases. In other words, if the contents of perceptual experience were directly available for thought – if they have a conceptual structure – we would be crippled by massive information overload.

While the evidence for Dretske's richness of information argument is somewhat a matter of simply reflecting on perception and thought, there is a great deal of psychological research that Dretske draws upon in developing his position.⁶³ This renders the success of his arguments a largely empirical matter; here, it seems sufficient

⁶³ For example, Dretske discusses the rule of seven, which tells us that there is a certain limit to the rate at which humans can process information, in Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, *op cit.*, p. 144. This discussion is based upon a famous paper in psychology by George Miller. Cf. Miller, G. 1956. "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information," in *Psychological Review*, 63, p. 81-97.

to highlight this, and proceed with a more general discussion. It may be useful to sketch out the overall model of perception that Dretske ends up with. To begin, perceptual experience provides information in analogue form. Thought employs information in digital form. So, to move from perceptual experience to thought, a digital converter of some kind must be in operation to extract information out of an analogue manifold. Furthermore, thought has a belief-like structure, and it seems appropriate to think of this as a conceptual structure. In order to be sufficiently distanced from thought content, it then becomes plausible to conclude that perceptual content is nonconceptual.

One obvious response available to conceptualists, when faced by the richness of information issue, is to question the significance of perceptual content being analogue in Dretske's sense. Even if we grant that there is legitimate insight in the basic idea, as there seems to be, it is clearly debatable what to conclude from this. For example, when faced with a rich manifold of analogue information, a conceptualist could argue that the information is manageable due to the role attention plays.⁶⁴ Furthermore, as digital information is always contained in analogue information, it might be thought that there is no need to think of experience – with its analogue aspect – as requiring a unique structure that is somewhat alien to what enters into thought. Rather than thinking of attention as operating through a digital converter of sorts, that morphs one type of content into another, why not think of attention as a tool used in picking out part of a manifold that is already in a form appropriate for belief?

⁶⁴ There are several ways to develop a conceptualist objection here. One way is to point out that at any given moment, we only focus on certain aspects of our perceptual experience, and we should think of attention as a “spotlight” that picks out a manageable amount of information from an incredibly rich array. Of course, an argument like this seems dependent upon general views about what attention is, as well as empirical research about human information processing.

One reason that Dretske resists this type of move is that there appears to be a legitimately powerful reduction of information when we move from analogue coding to digital coding. To see how this is so, imagine an analogue to digital converter of the following sort.⁶⁵ Suppose we have a speedometer that consists of a semicircle with numbers ranging from 0 to 99, and a needle that moves around the semicircle.⁶⁶ This circle and needle serve as an analogue representation of a given speed; the speed can only be identified by looking at the speedometer, and making an approximation of its actual position (as the needle has width). For example, you might see the needle touching the number 80, and state that speed is 80. However, in reading off this value, what you say fails to distinguish between cases where the needle is leaning to the left of 80, leaning to the right of 80, or very closely lined up with the number 80.⁶⁷ If we just look at the statement itself, that “the speed is 80,” we have a digital representation of the information, and this contains less information than the speedometer. In cases like this, we have transformed some information from analogue to digital form, resulting in a loss of information.

As it involves losing information, analogue to digital filtering can help explain the information-theoretic processes underlying all forms of information generation, classification, and recognition. It can help explain how we can move from the rich manifold of information available in perceptual experience, to information of a form suitable for thought. However, all of this depends on some highly theoretical work in

⁶⁵ Here a greatly simplified version is offered of an example developed in Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, *op cit.*, p. 138-139

⁶⁶ The choice of a speedometer with a needle is simply for illustrative purposes, and is potentially misleading. In particular, it should be emphasised that the contrast being drawn here is not between analogue and digital in the sense of a digital watch. The key points in what follow are about how certain information is analogue, how it can be changed to digital form, and how this involves a loss of information.

⁶⁷ Even if you say that the speed is approximately 80, the details underlying this judgment are filtered out.

information theory, which can be disputed. Furthermore, as already mentioned, there seems to be room for a conceptualist to resist the idea that there is an information overload problem facing human cognition in the first place.⁶⁸ With these concerns in mind, I won't dwell further on richness of information, and will move on to some related issues that deserve attention. In particular, there is the idea that amongst the information provided by perceptual experience, there can be aspects of what I experience that I am unable to articulate to myself using language. Furthermore, this isn't necessarily because I lack the appropriate concepts, but because concepts could never fully capture what I'm experiencing. In one of its forms, this issue has become known as fineness of grain, and we will turn to it now.

3.3) Fineness of Grain

It has been argued by Evans, Peacocke, and many others that the content of perceptual experience is more fine-grained than conceptual content could be.⁶⁹ For instance, it seems that I can see far more colours than I have concepts for, and that I can discriminate far more shapes than I have names for. My belief that the sky is blue has a single content – that the sky is blue – but it would be an appropriate response to countless perceptual experiences. There seems to be no sense in which my experiences of shapes, sounds, or other experiential qualities are limited by the concepts I possess. If perceptual content can outstrip what is provided by conceptual resources – due to experience being

⁶⁸ I won't directly engage with this debate here, as I suspect that the most important arguments are psychological, and will depend upon empirical results.

⁶⁹ Cf. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, *op cit*, and Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts*, *op cit*. Another example of a defender of this view is Tye, M. 2000. *Consciousness, Color and Content*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

too fine grained to be fully conceptual – then it seems the content of perceptual experience would be at least partly nonconceptual.

If we focus on visual experiences, such as experiencing the colour red, it is clear that “red” is a general term that applies to a wide range of distinguishable colours. Consider the different shades of red which can be distinguished from one another; these can be further grouped as being crimson, scarlet, cerise, and so on. However, as we continue to focus on finer and finer discriminations, our repertoire of colour concepts quickly runs out. It is possible to reach a point at which someone can tell that two shades are different from one another, without that person being able to characterise the difference in terms of specific colour concepts. One conclusion that might be drawn from this is that we don’t use specific colour concepts that are detailed enough because this would be absurd; in order for concepts to directly map on to every detail of experience, it seems that an infinite store of concepts is needed. As we obviously don’t possess separate learned concepts for every perceptible difference that we come across, this provides motivation for concluding that perceptual content doesn’t have a conceptual structure.

According to many conceptualists, such as McDowell, arguments about fineness of grain are not very persuasive. In all cases, it seems we can understand how to characterise a content using conceptual resources, and we shouldn’t, McDowell argues, be led astray by the fact that conceptual resources don’t map directly onto every specific feature we are confronted with in experience. One suggestion McDowell makes is that we can invoke demonstrative concepts to understand how all experience is fully conceptual. As McDowell puts it, “in the throes of an experience of the kind that

putatively transcends one's conceptual powers – an experience that ex hypothesi affords a suitable sample – one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like “that shade,” in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of the sample.”⁷⁰ The idea here is that even if you don't possess specific concepts that capture the details of an experience, the experience can still be fully captured through a demonstrative concept.

In order to actually oppose a nonconceptualist, it isn't sufficient to just be able to accurately apply a demonstrative concept to an experience. After all, in all of the cases where various reds are being discriminated from one another, each experience is conceptual in the sense that it is an experience of something red. With this in mind, it is unhelpful if all we are saying is that in addition to being red, we have a particular shade of red which we are labelling “that shade;” everyone agrees that we can label things in this way. The issue is whether the locution “that shade” can legitimately capture the information conveyed by the experience, in the same way that the finest grained concepts we could imagine would be able to do. Can demonstrative concepts really do this?

McDowell suggests that we can be confident that demonstrative concepts are doing the appropriate work if it's the case that the employment of a demonstrative concept, in the case of a colour experience, can persist beyond the duration of an isolated experience. This means that demonstrative concepts should be legitimately recognitional; they must admit of recognition by the employer of the concept.⁷¹ For example, if I

⁷⁰ McDowell, *Mind and World*, *op. cit.*, p. 57

⁷¹ McDowell, like many others, takes recognition to be a mark of the conceptual. The main idea here is that concepts possess some degree of determinateness; the concept of a lion is one thing, the concept of a tiger is another. If a subject is in a state with conceptual content, then, the content should be determinate in ways that the subject can grasp in some sense (otherwise, it is not clear that the subject is actually employing the relevant concepts). In the case of perceptual content, this determinateness may be thought to involve recognitional abilities, as recognition involves tracking the specific details of the experience.

identify a particular shade as “that shade,” I must be able to recognize the same shade at some point in the future, even if I can only do this in the very near future. If such recognitional capacities are trustworthy marks of conceptual activity, then demonstrative concepts may do the work McDowell wants them to do. However, is perceptual experience really recognitional in the required way?

There are reasons to suspect that recognition, at the level of perceptual experience, is not as extensive as McDowell would need. While these reasons are far from conclusive, they do seem to have some general plausibility. They can perhaps be best described by working through various examples. Each of the following examples is meant to present various experiences, in which shades of colour are discriminated from one another, and in which it’s unclear whether recognitional capabilities govern the discriminations that have been made.

To begin, suppose James is sorting through various paint samples on his desk. Each sample has a number on the back – R1, R2, R3, and so on – and each is a very slightly different shade of red. After lining up all the shades, suppose James decides that R17 is the shade of red that he would like to paint his shed. However, before flipping over the paint sample to check its number, a gust of wind rushes into the room, scattering all of the paint samples to the floor. James quickly retrieves them, and within seconds, has them all colour side up on his desk again. However, James has a problem; he can no longer tell which paint sample is the one he just picked out. The ability to keep a specific shade in mind, in the absence of the sample, eludes him.

Consider a similar example. Suppose George loves wearing monochromatic T-shirts, and has 2 which are bright red. When they are side by side, George believes that

they are different shades. Preparing to head out for the day, he hangs the one he intends to wear neatly on the back of a chair, and without looking, tosses the other shirt over his shoulder onto the ground as he leaves the room. George returns a minute or so later. Unfortunately, the shirt has fallen off of the chair, and he finds both shirts lying on the ground next to one another. He is unable to tell from their positions which one fell off the chair, and furthermore, can't recognize either shirt as the one he had decided to wear. In this case, in the absence of the two samples, George quickly lost his ability to tell them apart in the relevant way.

The upshot of these examples is that recognition can fail, often very quickly, in the sort of cases that demonstrative concepts are supposed to be useful in. It is difficult to tell what to make of this. After all, we can imagine cases where James and George succeed in tracking the shade that corresponds to their earlier decision. As long as this is possible, in principle, then we might have a sufficient form of recognition in play. However, there is a difference between being able to imagine what it is like for recognition to occur in some cases, and being confident that humans really do have the required abilities. Furthermore, in the extreme cases, Dretske-style thinking about information overload might provide reason for suspecting that we won't find recognition of the required sort.

Another suggestion is that fineness of grain, while suggestive, doesn't fully capture why we should think perceptual experience outstrips conceptual resources. Regardless of the debate over fineness of grain, it might seem that the fundamental points of contention here are weaker than they should be. This view is presented by Kelly, who holds that while fineness of grain does raise some relevant issues, it misses a much

deeper observation.⁷² The observation Kelly has in mind is that perceptual experience is heavily situation dependent, and that even if concepts could accommodate fineness of grain, they would still fail to account for how the content of perceptual experience is deeply dependent on contextual elements. Out of the idea of situation dependency, it does seem that a fairly strong case for nonconceptual content can be developed, which succeeds in overcoming some of the weaknesses found in the richness of information issue, as well as the fineness of grain issue.

3.4) Situation Dependency and the Idea of Texture

To claim that perceptual experience is situation dependent, for our purposes here, is to claim that contextual features play an essential role in making an experience what it is. In order for situation dependency to provide strong motivations for nonconceptualism, two criteria must be met. First, contextual features must actually be essential to an experience being what it is. Second, there must be good reasons for thinking that it is incorrect to incorporate these features within the scope of the conceptual. Before seeing whether situation dependency meets these criteria, however, we need to describe what it consists of in more detail. In general, as Kelly puts it, the crucial contextual aspects of a perceptual experience are “the dependence of a perceived object on the perceptual context in which it is perceived and the dependence of a perceived property on the object it is perceived to be a property of.”⁷³ Taken together, these features capture the situation dependency of perceptual experience.

⁷² Cf. Kelly, “The non-conceptual content of perceptual experience: Situation dependence and fineness of grain,” *op cit*.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 601

Kelly argues that the first kind of dependency – the dependency of a perceived object on perceptual context – can be illustrated by the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. For example, consider colour constancy. I will experience an object to be the same colour in many different lighting conditions, even though those conditions affect my overall experience. For example, if I look at a white wall, part of the wall might be more brightly lit than other parts of the wall. However, the whole wall still appears to me to be the same colour, even though my experience of the bright parts is clearly different from my experience of the dark parts. What distinguishes the experiences is not a difference in colour, but a difference in lighting conditions. This means that no demonstrative concept, of the sort McDowell offers in the fineness of grain cases, could adequately capture the content of each experience. The demonstratives are inadequate because “that shade” fails to distinguish between the colour as presented in a bright room, and the same colour as presented in a dark room.

The second kind of dependency – between a property and its object – is taken to simply cohere well with our phenomenological insights. For example, it seems plausible to claim, in some cases, that the blue of a wool rug would not be the same blue were it not a woolly blue.⁷⁴ The idea here is that properties like blue and woolly are not independent properties that any object can share in the same way. While we might discover that the blue of my carpet and the blue of my shirt are the same – perhaps by measuring the wavelength of the light reflected by each surface – this might not actually tell us much about the content of related experiences. A demonstrative like “that shade” can only pick out one shade of colour among others; it couldn’t pick out differences

⁷⁴ This example is adopted from Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. “The Thing and the Natural World,” in *Phenomenology of Perception*, C. Smith (tr.). London: Routledge and Keagan Paul.

between the same shades when attached to different objects. This is a second way which, according to Kelly, demonstrative concepts are of no help in capturing the content of experience.

While these two types of dependency are distinct from one another, they point to very similar observations about how context plays a role in our experiences. While Kelly's introduction of these ideas is useful and quite powerful, in my view, much more can be said than what he offers in developing his basic ideas. One approach that I will advance is to focus on how contextual dependencies introduce a special kind of *texture* to experience. In the case of overall context, the texture involved is relative; when an object is perceived, its *relative texture* is supplied by aspects of the environment that influence how the object is experienced, without pointing to specific aspects of the object itself. In addition to the lighting conditions example discussed above, relative texture is also supplied by things like background noise, background smells, and so on. In the case of properties of an object, we have *permanent texture*; unless the object is itself altered, this sort of texture will remain constant, regardless of changes in the environment surrounding the object. Permanent texture reflects how different properties of an object are deeply mixed with one another, and affect how an object is experienced; the issues surrounding permanent texture are largely a matter of how perceptual experience has many modalities, which are routinely mixed together in the formation of any particular experience.

The first main point of contention – that texture actually does shape experience – seems fairly easy to support. In a sense, all that is really being claimed is that if you take any aspect of your overall experience, it will be affected by other aspects of your experience. Furthermore, “affected” here can be read fairly weakly, without losing the

force of the suggestion that experiences involve both relative and permanent texture. Start with the case of relative texture. Suppose I'm watching a baseball game, and am focusing on the ball. For one thing, as already mentioned, the lighting conditions at the game will affect how the ball looks to me. In addition to this though, how the ball looks to me will also be affected by the rest of the visual scene; consider the difference between the ball in full view as it is held up by a lucky fan in the first row, and the same ball moments before as it was partially concealed within the pitcher's glove. As the fan and the pitcher will be in different locations relative to an observer, the ball's relative size will change. It will look bigger or smaller depending on where the observer is. Furthermore, when the fan holds the ball up, I might be able to see its red seam, which I was unable to see when the ball was in the pitcher's glove.

The case of permanent texture is similar. It seems reasonable to think that the white of the ball, and the white of the pitcher's uniform, could be the same white (in the sense of wavelength's of light being reflected), but still be different in some important ways.⁷⁵ For example, the uniform might seem to be a softer white, due to the material involved; perhaps the uniform seems cottony white, while the ball seems to be a leathery white. It also seems that some slight changes in the ball are capable of affecting what it looks like; consider what a motionless ball sitting in the grass looks like, in comparison with the same ball as it flies through the air. In a fairly obvious way, the spin of the ball when it is in motion affects what it looks like.

It seems hard to deny that texture affects experience in some way; the cases described above will be taken as sufficient for supporting this point. It seems much

⁷⁵ Note here that wavelength's of light is just being used as a tool for deciding when a particular colour, as it is experienced, should be considered the same colour.

harder, however, to see what texture has to do with the issue of how concepts are related to perceptual experience. In the case of relative texture, it seems that the main worries are similar to what was discussed in the fineness of grain case. Because perceptual experiences incorporate relative texture, it is hard to see how any actual experience – or more specifically, the objects that make up any actual experience – could really be fully specified by conceptual resources. Similar to the fineness of grain case, it seems to be a massive task to show how conceptual resources could handle all of that, and the challenge might seem even more daunting than in the fineness of grain case. Similar worries exist in the case of permanent texture. Before working through these issues (in at least one form), however, it may be useful to develop some fairly unique considerations that apply to permanent texture.

The main idea I wish to stress emerges out of how perceptual experiences involve mixed modalities. At any given time, in normal waking life, my immediate experience consists of whatever I see, hear, touch, and so on, *all at the same time*. Only very rarely do I have an experience that is purely visual, or purely any one modality; if I just focus on what I'm seeing, I have to filter out the information being given to me through other perceptual modalities. Now, if I focus on any given object of experience, the permanent texture of that object often involves combining input from different modalities. For example, if I pick up a guitar, and start playing it, my experience of the guitar will typically combine what the guitar feels like as I hold it, what the guitar looks like, and the sound that the guitar is making, among other things. Furthermore, it is often difficult to sharply delineate the aspects of my experience that fall under one modality, from aspects which fall under a different modality.

The ways that sensory modalities can mix are demonstrated most clearly in the case of food. When you eat something, your experience of what the food tastes like incorporates things like smell, texture, and temperature. For example, the same soup can taste different when it is cold rather than hot, and a pungent cheese can taste less flavourful when you have a stuffy nose (and are unable to smell the cheese as well). Most food has a very rich permanent texture, as it may not be possible to neatly separate out all the different modalities that are involved in how something tastes, and pin down what contribution they make in isolation.⁷⁶

It may remain somewhat obscure how situation dependency, texture, and mixed modal experience are connected. The details here deserve further attention. One form of situation dependency, as described above, is the way in which a perceived property is dependent upon its object. The idea of permanent texture is very closely related to this type of dependency. An experience has permanent texture when it includes properties of an object, together with the object, which are experienced *together*, resulting in a “textured” experience that involves properties which are not readily isolatable from their occurrence in the experience. One type of experience with permanent texture, if the above discussion is convincing, is mixed modal experience. The main aim, at least so far, has been to show that we have good reasons for thinking that mixed modal experiences can display permanent texture. For ease of discussion, from here on, mixed modal experiences that display permanent texture will be abbreviated as MMEPs. We can now

⁷⁶ The main issue here is whether the taster is able to separate things out when examining their own experience. The claim being put forward, at this point, is simply that when we look at examples, it’s hard to be confident that it is always possible to separate things out neatly.

turn to the issue of how MMEPs support the idea that perceptual experiences have nonconceptual content.⁷⁷

It should be clear that we won't have single concepts that capture, in detail, every possible MMEP; we would need an infinite store of concepts for this to be the case. The situation here is similar to what was seen in the fineness of grain discussion. A promising strategy for a conceptualist, like in the fineness of grain case, would be to appeal to demonstrative concepts to show that MMEPs have conceptual content. However, in the case of MMEPs, we can't apply concepts like "that *shade*," "that *penguin*," or "that *table*." Instead, we have to rely upon concepts like "that *warmish-wet-mintyness*," which do not occur naturally to us (and which may require some explanation when we try to use them).⁷⁸ Demonstrative concepts that apply to MMEPs seem artificial; we have to be especially creative in our attempts to find a sortal concept that captures things properly. One way to explain the artificiality of such concepts is nonconceptualism. If perceptual experience has nonconceptual content, then any application of concepts to such experience will be somewhat artificial, and MMEPs would no longer seem especially problematic.⁷⁹

It might be objected that it doesn't matter, in the case of perceptual experience, which sortal concepts fill out demonstrative concepts. After all, we could simply name an experience (or part of one), refer to it demonstratively, and then check if the experience has features which reflect conceptuality.⁸⁰ However, this objection misses the

⁷⁷ The arguments that follow apply to any experience with permanent texture. However, since the main point seems most striking in the case of MMEPs, they will be focused on.

⁷⁸ A *warmish-wet-mintyness* might be experienced when drinking mint tea, for example.

⁷⁹ Applying concepts to states with nonconceptual content is "artificial" in the limited sense that the content lacks an inherent conceptual shape. In other words, the content doesn't come "naturally" in conceptual form, but needs to be worked on in certain ways.

⁸⁰ A possible example here is checking whether the experience is recognitional in certain ways.

point of the MMEP discussion. The point is that if an experience has conceptual content, in the sense developed in chapter one, concepts need to play a crucial role in forming the content of the experience. The problem raised by MMEPs is that the concepts that apply to them seem to be genuinely concocted, and merely applied to content, rather than found to be a revelation of what the content already consists of.

A further way in which MMEPs appear to support nonconceptualism is reflected in our abilities to understand certain metaphors. Suppose before playing a guitar, which I have plugged into an amplifier, I decide that the guitar looks loud. There might be an obvious way in which it looks loud; it might look loud because I notice that the dial on the amplifier is spun all the way to maximum. It might also look loud in some other way; perhaps among my circle of friends, loud music is thought to be great, so one way of saying that my guitar is looking great is to say that it looks loud. In both of these metaphorical cases, however, the metaphor being used combines the way something looks with the way it might sound.

Metaphors that mix perceptual modalities are not only familiar, and easy to use, but seem useful. One way of making sense of all of this is to say that metaphors of this sort are helpful because they bring concepts to bear on something that is not actually conceptual; on this approach, the texture of experience is taken to be below the conceptual radar. A different way of making sense of mixed modal metaphors is to claim that the creative uses of language, of the relevant sort, would only be possible if perceptual experience is itself conceptual. Instead of suggesting that mixed modal experiences, and various metaphorical abilities, are an obstacle to conceptual content, they might be interpreted as showing exactly the opposite; perhaps we are able to

understand certain metaphors because they reflect a highly complicated conceptual arrangement of what is already present within experience. All of this suggests that while situation dependency presents a difficult challenge for conceptualists, there is a room for further debate. I will leave it to others to pursue these matters further, and will now turn to some final considerations.

3.5) Comparing Experience and Belief

The ideas surrounding the suggestions that experience involves richness of information, fineness of grain, and situation dependency all display various strengths and weaknesses. Richness of information, while promising, depends a great deal on empirical and theoretical details.⁸¹ Fineness of grain seems to be difficult to interpret, and potentially too limited in terms of capturing the most important aspects of experience. Situation dependency and texture seems powerful, but is heavily based in certain intuitions, that may admit of various interpretations. It might seem that more needs to be offered on behalf of nonconceptualism.

One approach that may be helpful is to directly compare the content of experience to the content of belief in various ways. The idea here is that belief content is a central case of conceptual content, and that if it differs in some fundamental ways from perceptual content, then there might be reason to resist the suggestion that perceptual content should be seen as conceptual. One idea is that texture, without getting bogged down in the above discussion of texture, strongly suggests that perception and belief are different in a basic way. To reinforce one of the main claims included under texture, as

⁸¹ Much of the difficulty here, in my view, lies in figuring out how to incorporate empirical results into philosophical theorizing about concepts and information.

Crane writes, “there is strictly speaking no such thing as the perception of the brownness of the table in isolation from the perception of its rectangularity.”⁸² In perceptual experience, experiencing brown involves perceiving the actual shape of an object. In belief, a belief that something is brown implies that it has a shape, but does not present any particular shape. One way to state this difference is to say that while perceptions of colour contain specific perceptions of shape, beliefs about colour only imply general beliefs about shape.

Another difference, noted by Crane, is that experiences and beliefs differ with respect to the inferential relations they admit.⁸³ For beliefs, it makes good sense to say that inferential relations hold between beliefs, and that one belief can be inferred from another. By comparison, it is nonsense to say that inferential relations hold *between* experiences; it is impossible to infer one experience from another. From my current overall experience, I can’t infer any other actual experience; at best, I can only infer beliefs about what I experience, and possibly make further inferences as a result of those beliefs. As experiences are not inferentially connected in the same way as beliefs, it may seem bizarre to try and ascribe the same kind of content to both beliefs and experiences.

Of course, even if we are convinced that these differences show that experience and belief are different in important ways, it is not clear what to make of this result. Perhaps the differences, at the level of inferences, emerge not due to the actual contents being different, but due to the content being located in a different type of mental state. Furthermore, it is possible to develop a conceptualist positions that claim perceptual experience is conceptual, but in a different way than belief states; I will not attempt here

⁸² Cf. Crane, T. 1992. “The non-conceptual content of experience”, in T. Crane, editor, *The Contents of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 152-153

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 152

to classify any particular views as best read in this way or not. Despite these possibilities, there does seem to be some genuine force behind the suggestion that the content of experience is distinct from the content of beliefs, in ways which reflect a severely different underlying structure.

It is important to not overstate the force of the case that has been developed here on behalf of nonconceptualism. There does appear to be considerable merit in the arguments explored in the second chapter on behalf of conceptualism. It is my view that on the balance of considerations, nonconceptualism is a more promising option, especially in light of the situation dependency of perceptual experience. However, there does seem to be room for argument on both sides, and I have done my best to highlight where I think this room can be found. In pursuing such arguments, we should always be sensitive to both the details of experience, and an overall view of thought and experience. It is my hope that this last point, whatever it is worth, is something that both conceptualists and nonconceptualists can agree with.

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