

# Nonconceptual content

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One of the central debates in recent discussions of the philosophy of perception has been the debate about whether the contents of experience are conceptual or nonconceptual.

## 1 Two meanings of ‘nonconceptual content’

Participants in this debate have spent too little time trying to make clear what it would mean for perceptual content to be nonconceptual. One can isolate in the literature the following two interpretations:

A mental state has *absolutely nonconceptual content* iff that mental state has a different kind of content than do beliefs, thoughts, etc.

A mental state of an agent *A* (at a time *t*) has *relatively nonconceptual content* iff the content of that mental state includes contents not grasped (possessed) by *A* at *t*.

It should be obvious that to say that content is nonconceptual in one sense is not to say that it is nonconceptual in the other; it is also, I think, clear that there are no trivial entailment relations between the two.

A nice example of conflation of these two senses of ‘nonconceptual content’ is provided by Peacocke (2001):

“While being reluctant to attribute concepts to the lower animals, many of us would also want to insist that the property of (say) representing a flat brown surface as

being at a certain distance from one can be common to the perceptions of humans and of lower animals. ...If the lower animals do not have states with conceptual content, but some of their states have contents in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual.”

This argument seems to run as follows:

- (1) Animals possess no concepts.
  - (2) The contents of the perceptions of animals are nonconceptual. (1)
  - (3) Animals and human beings are related to the same kind of content in perception.
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- (C) The contents of human perceptions are nonconceptual. (2,3)

If we interpret ‘nonconceptual content’ to mean ‘absolutely nonconceptual content,’ (2) does not follow from (1).

But if we interpret ‘nonconceptual’ in this argument to mean ‘relatively nonconceptual,’ (C) does not follow from (2) and (3). For, on this disambiguation, the argument from (2) and (3) to (C) would run as follows: non-human animals do not possess the contents of their experiences; the contents of animal experiences are the same kinds of things as the contents of human experiences; therefore humans do not possess the contents of their experiences. But this is not a valid argument, because nothing rules out the possibility that both human beings and animals are related to the same kinds of contents in perception, but that human beings, and not animals, must possess or grasp those contents.

Peacocke’s version of the argument from sameness of animal and human perceptual content is thus an excellent example of the problems caused by conflating absolute and relative nonconceptual content. Each step in his argument may be validated by one of the interpretations of ‘nonconceptual,’ but neither interpretation makes both steps valid.

## 2 Arguments for absolutely nonconceptual content

Most arguments which are presented as arguments for absolutely nonconceptual content fall well short of their target. A good example is the argument from ‘fineness of grain,’ the intuition behind which is well-stated by Richard Heck:

“Consider your current perceptual state — and now imagine what a complete description of the way the world appears to you at this moment might be like. Surely a thousand words would hardly begin to do the job.”

Suppose that this is right; suppose that the contents of an experience or perceptual state are far more detailed and full of information than could be captured in a single thought, or even in a lifetime of thoughts. On the face of it, this hardly shows that the information given in perception is of a different *kind* than the information about the world represented in a belief; it shows, at most, that there’s more of it in the case of perception.

The only plausible sorts of arguments for absolutely nonconceptual contents would be an argument that show that, e.g., perceptual content is Russellian, and a separate argument to show that the contents of thoughts are Fregean. We’ve already seen one of the former, and there are many plausible examples of the latter. But these belong more to the philosophy of language than the philosophy of perception.

### 3 Arguments for relatively nonconceptual content

#### 3.1 *‘Possessing a concept’*

Inconveniently, the definition of relatively nonconceptual content is given in terms of concept possession, and this notion is extremely unclear.

One plausible interpretation is that  $A$  possesses a concept  $C$  iff  $A$  is capable of having thoughts involving  $C$ . Here ‘involving’ might be glossed as: having a content one of whose constituents is  $C$ . (If one does not like constituents talk, one can go for the sort of deflationary view of this we have already discussed.)

One can give stronger interpretations, but something this weak is needed to avoid the claim that thought as well as perception has relatively nonconceptual content.

#### 3.2 *The argument from fineness of grain*

The central argument in recent discussions of nonconceptual content has been the argument that the contents of perceptions are too rich, or fine-grained, to be conceptual contents. We saw above that this argument was irrelevant to the issue of absolute nonconceptual content; as applied to the issue of relative nonconceptual content, this argument amounts to the claim that the contents of perceptions are fine-grained enough that they exceed the concepts possessed by the subject having the experience.

A quick, potted history of the debate about this runs as follows: Evans 1982 argued that we do not have as many color concepts as there are shades of color as we can perceptually discriminate, so that the contents of perceptions must be more fine-grained than the concepts we possess. McDowell 1994, §III.5 replied that Evans had illicitly limited the color concepts under consideration to general color words like “red” and “green”, and noted that we also possess demonstrative concepts of the sort that we might express, while attending to a sample, by phrases like “that shade” or just “that”, while focusing on the color in question. Kelly 2001 has replied to McDowell by claiming that we do not possess enough demonstrative concepts to cover all the cases in which we make perceptual discriminations.

Kelly’s argument begins with the defense of the following condition for possession of demonstrative concepts:

In order to possess a demonstrative concept for  $x$ , a subject must be able to consistently re-identify a given object or property as falling under the concept (if it does).

The structure of the argument is then to describe a case in which a subject has an experience of a color, but does not satisfy this condition for possessing a demonstrative concept (perhaps expressible by “that color”) which refers to the color. If we can describe such a case, and if this possession condition is correct, then we will have described a case in which part of the content of a subject’s experience is not among the concepts grasped by the subject (presuming, plausibly, that the agent will have no non-demonstrative concept of the color).

Kelly’s scenario is as follows: a subject is presented several times with a pair of color chips, and each time is able to distinguish the color chips in perception; that is, each time, the subject correctly says that the two color chips are different in color. Now we take one of those color chips, and present it to the subject, asking him whether it is the color chip originally presented on his

left. Suppose that we do this ten times, and that the subject answers ‘yes’ five times, and ‘no’ five times. Then the subject has failed the above possession condition for a demonstrative concept referring to the color of the chip originally presented on his left, and then presented ten times by itself: he cannot consistently re-identify the property. But he is clearly able to distinguish the property in experience, as evidenced by his proficiency in distinguishing the two color chips when presented together. Conclusion: the color was part of the content of his experience, but was not the content of any demonstrative concept he possessed.

It seems to me that the case Kelly describes is a clear *reductio* of the possession condition he defends, rather than a convincing argument against the conceptualist position.

Consider for a moment what is involved in denying that the subject can have demonstrative thoughts about the color of the chip originally presented on his left, and later presented by itself. We must say that, although he is looking directly at the color of the chip, the subject is *unable to have any demonstrative thoughts about involving the color of the chip at all*. But this seems excessively strong. It seems clear that when I am in direct perceptual contact with a color property, I am able to have thoughts about that property whatever happens when I am presented with the property for re-identification at a later time. If forced to choose between the claim that one can always have thoughts involving a color to which one is attending — whether this is the color of an object in one’s environment or merely the color that one perceives such an object as having — and the claim that the possession condition for demonstratives given above is correct, the choice seems clear.

One way to press this intuition is to imagine the subject uttering a demonstrative when presented with the color chip by itself. The subject might say, for example, “I’m not sure whether that color [while pointing at the chip] is the same as the color of the chip on the left earlier.” It is natural to think that the subject understands the sentence he has just uttered, and grasps the thought it expresses. But it is also natural to think that the thought expressed by the sentence has a constituent corresponding to the demonstrative phrase “that color”, and that this constituent is or refers to the color of the chip. But saying these two things commits us to saying that, contra the possession condition, the subject grasps a demonstrative concept which picks out the color of the chip. The only alternatives seem to be to say either that the subject fails to understand the sentence he has just uttered, or that “that color”, as it appears in this sentence, lacks a meaning. But neither of these moves seem particularly plausible.

Indeed, there is a sense in which the thought-experiment, construed as an argument that the subject does not possess the relevant color concepts, is self-refuting. For it is surely a part of the assumed background of the case that when the examiner asks the subject whether the color chip presented alone is *of the same color* as the chip originally presented on his left, or whether *that color* is the same as that of the chip originally on the left, the subject understands the question. But how could a subject do this without grasping a concept of the relevant color?

This exhibits a common failing of arguments for relatively nonconceptual content: they impose implausibly strong constraints on concept possession. Possible diagnosis: confusion about what ‘concept possession’ could mean in this context.

### 3.3 Martin’s memory argument

Martin (1992) describes a case in which an agent, Mary, is playing a game with dice, one of which is 8-sided and one of which is 12-sided. But Mary does not distinguish between the two dice; she treats all dice with more than six sides as the same. Martin claims that, when playing with the dice, Mary may well lack the concept of a dodecahedron; and this seems plausible. But, he says, Mary might later, after acquiring the concept of a dodecahedron, recall her experience playing

the game, and realize that one of the dice was a dodecahedron. This, Martin says, indicates that Mary's original experience presented the die as a dodecahedron; but, if Mary did not possess the concept of a dodecahedron, this must mean that the content of her experience was nonconceptual.

The key step in this argument is evidently the use of a conditional of the following form:

(A can infer  $p$  from remembering an experience had at  $t$ )  $\rightarrow$  ( $p$  was part of the content of A's experience at  $t$ )

But this principle is open to clear counterexamples. Consider, for example, the following case: I remember seeing an inscription on a plaque in my school of the words "Ad maiorem dei gloriam"; not knowing Latin, I did not know what these words meant. Later on, I learn a bit of Latin, and, recalling my perception of this inscription, come to judge that the plaque had an inscription which meant "For the greater honor and glory of God." So we can infer that it was part of the content of my original experience that the plaque had an inscription which meant "For the greater honor and glory of God."

This inference is clearly fallacious. My original perception did not have this as a part of its content; I am able to infer that the inscription had this meaning because, since perceiving the plaque, I have acquired the ability to understand certain sentences of Latin. This can be turned into an objection to Martin's example: why should we not say that Mary's original experience did not have the concept of a dodecahedron as part of its content, but that Mary was able to infer later that her childhood game was played using a dodecahedron due to her acquisition of conceptual capacities parallel to my acquisition of the ability to understand Latin?

### *3.4 Learning or possession-explanation arguments*

Basic idea: we need to explain how we can come to possess concepts like the color red; the only plausible explanation is in terms of perceptual experience. But if perception were not relatively nonconceptual, one would have to *already* possess the concept of redness in order to have a perceptual experience which represents something as red. (See Heck (2000) and, for a clearer version, Roskies (2008).)

Why this seems to be a bad kind of argument: it seems that we can explain concept possession in terms of experience even if having the experience is metaphysically sufficient for possessing the concept.

## **4 A conjecture about perceptual content and thought availability**

Let's suppose that the thesis that perceptual content is relatively nonconceptual is false, so that having an experience involving content  $C$  is sufficient for having thoughts involving  $C$ .

Then we can ask whether something stronger is true: whether it is the case that for any experience  $e$  whose content involves  $C$ , then it is possible to acquire the ability to have thoughts involving  $C$  for the first time by having  $e$ .

This is the converse of the Content/Availability principle, which we have already discussed. If both are true, this gives us necessary and sufficient conditions for a perceptual experience to have a content involving a certain concept (propositional constituent):

$\Box\forall e\forall C$  ( $e$  has  $C$  as parts of its content iff  $e$  could make  $C$  available for thought/having  
 $e$  could give the perceiver the ability to have thoughts involving  $C$  for the first time)

Two complications:

- Perhaps there are some contents which both can be perceptually represented and which are such that anyone capable of having thoughts at all can have thoughts involving that content. These would falsify the above; it should be restricted to contents which are not always available for thought.
- This quantifies over experiences, and talks about a certain modal property of these experiences: what thoughts those experiences *could* make available. This means that we need some understanding of what it means to say that  $A$  and  $B$  are having the same experience. In the present context, a natural thought is that the relevant sense of ‘same experience’ is ‘experience with the same content.’ This means that we are using facts about sameness of content to decide what the contents of a given experience include; which in turn means that we can hardly claim to have provided an account of what gets into the content of experience which presupposes no facts about perceptual content.

But that is OK. People who disagree about how sparse the contents of experience are might still agree in particular cases about whether two experiences have the same content.

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