

Arguments against the availability requirement

PHIL 93507

February 26, 2012

The intuitive case in favor of the Availability Requirement was that for any way the objects in your environment are presented as being, you can always judge that, or wonder whether, they are *that way*. This suggests that one fundamental way in which we are able to have thoughts about the properties presented as in our environment is via demonstration.

For demonstrative thought to play the role in the defence of the Availability Requirement that I'd like it to, the following thesis must be true:

Demonstrative Availability

If an object or property is part of the content of a normal adult human subject's experience at *t*, then the subject is able, at *t*, to demonstrate that object or property.

What does it mean to demonstrate an object or property? When we demonstrate a property with a demonstrative phrase like 'that color' or 'that shape' — or a simple 'that', accompanied by a demonstration of the relevant quality — the reference of our use of that demonstrative is a property. Given that we are assuming Russellianism about the contents of thought, it's also plausible that the relevant property is the content of that demonstrative.

When I talk about 'demonstrating a property', what I mean is 'using a demonstrative which has that property as its content.'

The point made above — that for every way our experience presents an object as being, we can judge that, or wonder whether, it is that way — amounts to a way of pointing out the prima facie plausibility of Demonstrative Availability. Nonetheless, it's a thesis about which many have been very skeptical. Why?

The main arguments against the Availability Requirement (and hence also against the stronger thesis of Demonstrative Availability) are versions of the first two arguments (allegedly) for Nonconceptualism we have already discussed.

First argument: from the fine-grained character of experience.

At first glance, the appeal to demonstratives seems ready-made to answer this argument. Even if I lack general color terms for each of the distinctive shades of green exemplified by the blades of grass in my field of vision, I can surely think about these colors by using demonstratives like ‘that color’ or ‘that shade.’

However, one might worry that this response to the argument from fineness of grain introduces too many distinctions. Suppose you and I are both examining a blade of grass, and that each of us are representing the blade of grass as the same color. Surely I could refer to the color represented by my experience as ‘that color’ while you do the same with ‘that shade.’ But surely these complex demonstratives differ in content; hence it can’t be that both capture the contents of our respective color experiences, these being the same. But there’s no non-arbitrary way to choose between these demonstratives; hence if one captures the contents of the relevant color experiences, both do. Therefore neither must capture the content of our experiences, and Demonstrative Availability is false.

In reply, I say that the relevant demonstratives are ones which directly refer to the color presented in the relevant experience. I think that it is plausible that we could use either ‘that shade’ or ‘that color’ — or both — in this way. We can also, more simply, just use ‘that’ — so long as this bare demonstrative is accompanied by attention to the relevant color, and the intention to demonstrate it.

Here’s a related, but different source of worry about Demonstrative Availability. Suppose that I am looking at the color of my shirt sleeve, and say ‘That is that color,’ while demonstrating the sleeve. It seems that what I say is (presuming that my shirt sleeve exists, and has a color) linguistically guaranteed to be true: in this sort of context, ‘that color’ just automatically refers to the color, whatever it is, of the object demonstrated. Let’s suppose that this color is blue₃₄. But now suppose, as is surely possible, that I’m in fact having an illusory experience of the color of the sleeve. Then my experience is representing the color of the sleeve as different than it actually is — as some color other than blue₃₄ — which means that I have not, after all, succeeded in demonstrating the color my experience represents the sleeve as having. Rather, demonstratives always pick out the property really instantiated by the relevant object in the world.

While the description of the above case is quite plausible, to conclude from it that demonstratives *never* pick out the property represented by the relevant experience in cases of illusion is to generalize much too quickly. In fact, this should have been clear from the initial argument in favor of Demonstrative Availability: if I can intelligibly wonder in some cases whether the sleeve is *that color*, then I must be able to use demonstratives to demonstrate properties represented as being in my environment, without committing myself to the claim that they are actually instantiated by objects in that environment. The obvious thought is that we just have here two ways of using demonstratives, which are, plausibly, distinguished by the intentions of the speaker — in the default case perhaps I intend to demonstrate the real color of the sleeve, but I can

also, if I wish, easily single out for demonstrative thought the color my experience presents the sleeve as having.

Innocent as this thought seems, many have thought that it is inconsistent with the denial of Nonconceptualism. Echoing Richard Heck, Michael Tye puts the point like this:

“But, now, in the case of misperception, there is no sample of the color in the world. So, how is the referent of the concept fixed? The obvious reply is that it is fixed by the content of the subject’s experience: the concept refers to the shade the given experience represents the surface as having. However, this reply is not available to the conceptualist about the content of visual experience; for the content of the demonstrative concept is supposed to be part of the content of the experience and so the concept cannot have its referent fixed by that content.” [cite tye 2006]

This seems to me to be one of those cases where we would be much better off if we just didn’t use the word “concept.” The only way to make sense of this as a problem is via an illicit equivocation on “concept.” We might use “demonstrative concept” to stand for either (i) a demonstrative mental representation (or natural language phrase), or (ii) for the content of such a representation. On interpretation (i), the concept is of course on no view part of the content of the associated experience; the concept, on this interpretation, is a bearer of content rather than a content itself. On interpretation (ii), the concept does not need to have its reference fixed — it is a content, and hence is the sort of thing which, of its nature, determines a reference. Hence there is no interpretation on which demonstrative concepts are both things which need to have their reference fixed by the relevant experience, and are things which are parts of the contents of that experience.

The situation is in fact just the opposite of what this objection suggests: the denial of Nonconceptualism makes it much *easier* to see how demonstrative phrases and thoughts could inherit their contents from the contents of perceptual experiences: if the two are the same sorts of things, then this is just a matter of the content of one mental state inheriting its content from another.

In general — contra influential arguments to the contrary — there is no inconsistency in conjoining Demonstrative Availability with the denial of Nonconceptualism, and holding that we acquire demonstrative concepts of, for example, certain colors from experience. If ‘acquisition of demonstrative concepts’ is just acquisition of an ability to have thoughts involving the contents of the relevant demonstratives, then this is just a matter of a content — in our cases, a color property — being part of the content of an experience, and this experience giving the subject the ability to have thoughts, judgements, etc. whose contents involve that property.