

Content and the explanatory role of experience

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It is widely held — I think correctly — that having certain sorts of perceptual experiences can explain one's ability to have certain sorts of thoughts. It is also widely held — I think incorrectly — that we can use this fact about the relationship between perception and thought to show that perception and thought differ in certain fundamental ways. Here are two such 'difference theses' about perception and thought:

- Experiences, unlike thoughts, are not contentful states.
- Experiences, unlike thoughts, are nonconceptual.

I think that both of these theses are false, but I won't be arguing for that here. Instead, I'll be arguing that they can't be established by arguments based on premises requiring experience to play certain explanatory roles. I'll consider three arguments of this form, which appeal, respectively, to the requirements that experience explain our capacity for singular thought, that it explain the reference of certain demonstrative concepts, and that it explain our ability to learn new concepts. In the last section, I'll present some more constructive thoughts about what the explanatory role of experience might tell us about the contents of perceptual experience.

1. THE EXPLANATION OF SINGULAR THOUGHT

For an argument of the first, most ambitious, sort, we can turn to John Campbell. Campbell contrasts the view that experiences have contents with the 'relational view' of experience, according to which, as he puts it, "the phenomenal character of your experience, as you look around the room, is constituted by the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as colour and

shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you.”¹ Campbell then raises the question as to how we are to decide between the relational view and the view that experiences have contents, and suggests that we can do so on the basis of the role of experience in explaining our ability to think about objects.

How might the proponent of a representational view of experience use experience to explain our ability to have thoughts about particular objects? The natural move, as Campbell notes, is to think of the contents of experiences as including, or singling out, those objects. But the attempt to explain singular thought by singular perceptual representation fails, Campbell thinks, for the following reason:

“Experience is what explains our grasp of the concepts of objects. But if you think of experience as intentional, as merely one among many ways of grasping thoughts, you cannot allow it this explanatory role. Suppose someone said: ‘Actually, reading newspapers is the fundamental way in which you understand the concepts of a mind-independent world. All your conceptual skills depend on your ability to read newspapers.’ The natural response to this would be that reading newspapers does indeed involve the exercise of conceptual skills, but it is simply one way among many of exercising those conceptual skills. Just so, if all there is to experience of objects is the grasping of demonstrative thoughts about them, then experience of objects is just one among many ways in which you can exercise your conceptual skills. ...

We are not to take the intentional character of experience as a given; rather, experience of objects has to be what explains our ability to think about objects. That means that we cannot view experience of objects as a way of grasping thoughts about objects. Experience of objects has to be something more primitive than the ability to think about objects, in terms of which the ability to think about objects can be explained.”²

This argument turns on an ambiguity in ‘ability to think about objects’, which in turn rests on two different ways in which philosophers use ‘thought.’ We can distinguish between various different sorts of contentful mental state types: belief, supposition, intention, etc. Sometimes ‘thought’ is used as a name for one among these mental state types — the state of thinking something, as opposed to believing it or assuming it — but other times it is used as a generic name for all contentful mental states. Correspondingly, sometimes, ‘having a thought with a certain content’ means, roughly, ‘being in some mental state or other with that content.’ But other times, it means ‘being in a specific sort of mental state — namely, a state of thinking — with that content.’ This leaves us

¹ Campbell (2002), 116.

² Campbell (2002), 121-2.

with two ways of understanding the thing which Campbell thinks that experience must explain:

- (a) The ability to be in a state of thinking about o
- (b) The ability to be in some mental state or other which is about o

On interpretation (a), the argument is a nonstarter. That is because the conclusion of the argument — that experience of objects has to be something more primitive than thinking about objects — is, on this interpretation, perfectly consistent with the idea that experiences are themselves contentful states. There is, after all, nothing especially perplexing about the idea that one contentful state might be more primitive than, and explanatory of, another.

Not so on interpretation (b); the defender of the idea that experiences have contents can hardly hold that experiences are more primitive than and explanatory of *any* contentful state, since on such a view an experience is such a state.

On this interpretation, though, Campbell's demand for explanation is an implausibly strong one, and is a bit too close to the simple denial of the claim that experiences have contents. Why should anyone not antecedently committed to the denial of the claim that experiences have contents find it plausible that experience must explain our ability to have contentful representations at all?

One might, in reply, say that we surely need *some* explanation of our capacity to enjoy singular contentful mental states, and say that it's at best unclear how to give such an explanation if we can't avail ourselves of facts about experience. But the move to a 'naive realist' sort of view of experience, like the relational view Campbell defends, just pushes the problem back a step. For, as Campbell is aware, one can't *simply* explain the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience in terms of properties of the environment of the subject, since some such properties affect the phenomenal character of the experience, and some do not. Hence we need at least a general account of which objects and properties, on a given occasion, enter into phenomenal character, and which do not. But if we could provide an account of this sort, it seems plausible that we could also use that to provide an account of (what the representationalist takes to be) the singular contents of experience.

2. THE EXPLANATION OF DEMONSTRATIVE REFERENCE

More plausible are arguments which try to use the explanatory role of experience to show, not that experiences lack contents altogether, but that there are certain significant differences between their contents and the contents of thoughts.

One argument of this sort has been defended by Richard Heck and, following him, Michael Tye. The argument seeks to establish the conclusion that the contents of experience are, unlike the contents of thoughts, nonconceptual. As it turns out, there are interesting differences between Heck's and Tye's versions of the argument; I'll begin with Heck's.

2.1. Heck's argument for nonconceptual content

Heck is careful to distinguish between the following two theses which have been associated with the slogan that the content of experience is nonconceptual. One is the view that the contents of experiences are different sorts of things than the contents of thoughts, and hence that nothing could be both the content of an experience and the content of a thought. This is often called the 'content view':

$$[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}] \square \neg \exists P \exists S \exists S^* \text{ (S has an experience with content P \& } S^* \text{ has a thought with content P)}$$

The second thesis is the thesis that subjects of experience need not possess the concepts which the content of the experience involves. Ideally, we want to state this thesis in a way which makes it independent of $[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$, and hence also independent of the claim that a concept — which is, on one standard usage, a constituent of the content of a thought — could be part of the content of an experience. To finesse this point, I will say that a concept is E-relevant to an experience if that experience either (i) has that concept as part of its content or (ii) would have its accuracy conditions 'canonically specified' using C. Then we can state our second sense of the claim that experience is nonconceptual — the 'state view' — as follows:

$$[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}] \diamond [\exists C: C \text{ is a concept}] \exists S \text{ (S has an experience to which C is E-relevant \& S does not possess C)}$$

Heck's stated aim is to argue for $[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$ — though, as we'll see, it's not clear that this is in the end the best interpretation of his argument.

That argument begins with the plausible thought that if subjects *do* possess concepts for every (say) color that they visually represent, then these must be demonstrative concepts. This is plausible in part because of the fine-grained character of perceptual representation; it just doesn't seem like I have general concepts corresponding to each of the roughly 10 million colors I can visually distinguish. The argument then aims to show that no conceptualist can give an adequate treatment of these demonstrative concepts, and in particular can supply no account of how their reference is fixed.

A natural first answer to the question of what fixes the reference of these demonstrative concepts is that they are fixed by the properties in the environment that the experience is an experience of — as Heck puts it, by the 'sample' of the color in the world. The problems emerge when we think about illusory experiences of the color of a thing; for, if $[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}]$ is false, the subject of such an experience still needs some way of forming a demonstrative concept of the color represented as in the environment, but the sample can obviously no longer play the relevant reference-fixing role. Heck considers the example of someone misperceiving the color of a desk, and considers the view that the subject of such an experience could still demonstrate the color the experience represents

as instantiated, despite that color not being present in the environment (here McDowell is the representative denier of non conceptual content):

“Surely I can form a concept of the color my desk appears to me to have. Is that not the demonstrative concept McDowell needs? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that I am inclined to believe that we can have demonstrative concepts of this kind. But no, because *McDowell* cannot respond to my argument in this way. McDowell claims not just that we can form concepts of the colors presented to us in experience, but that their references are fixed by a “sample” of the color in the world. To allow that my concept *that color* might *not* denote the color my desk actually has, but the one it appears to me to have, is obviously to deny that its reference is fixed by a “sample.” And that claim is not one McDowell can easily abandon, for what alternative conception of how the concept’s reference is fixed is available to him? The most obvious alternative would be to say that its reference is fixed by the content of my perceptual experience. But to say that would be to appeal to a level of perceptual representation McDowell does not want: If the content of my perceptual experience is to *fix* the content of my demonstrative concept of the color experience presents to me, my concept of that color cannot also be *part of* the content of that experience. If it were, the content of the demonstrative concept would be fixed by the content of that same concept.”³

The argument is, I think, best understood as a reductio of the conjunction of the negation of [NC_{CONTENT}] and [NC_{STATE}] — and hence as intended to show that, in at least one of our two senses, experiences must have nonconceptual content. Let’s say that a subject’s *perceptual demonstrative concepts* at a time are that subject’s concepts for the properties they are perceptually representing at that time. Then we can lay out Heck’s argument like this:

- (1) If \neg [NC_{STATE}], then subjects of experience must possess perceptual demonstrative concepts for every color they perceptually represent
- (2) Perceptual demonstrative concepts must have their reference fixed either by a color in the world or by the contents of the subject’s experience.
- (3) In the case of non-veridical experience, perceptual demonstrative concepts can’t have their reference fixed by a color in the world.
- (4) If \neg [NC_{STATE}], then subjects of non-veridical experiences must possess perceptual demonstrative concepts which have their reference fixed by the contents of the subject’s experience (1,2,3)
- (5) If \neg [NC_{CONTENT}], then perceptual demonstrative concepts are parts of the contents of experiences.

³ Heck (2000), 495-6.

- (6) If a perceptual demonstrative concept is part of the contents of a subject's experiences, then the reference of those perceptual demonstrative concepts are not fixed by the contents of the subject's experience.
- (7) If $\neg[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$, then the reference of perceptual demonstrative concepts are not fixed by the contents of the subject's experience. (5,6)
- (8) If $\neg[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}]$ & $\neg[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$, then the perceptual demonstrative concepts of subjects of non-veridical experiences have their reference fixed by the contents of the subjects experience and do not have their reference fixed by the contents of the subject's experience. (4,7)
- (C) $[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}]$ or $[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$ (8)

The argument is valid (or could be made so with a more careful formulation); and its premises certainly sound plausible. However, I think that this apparent plausibility vanishes on closer inspection. The problems come with the use of the word 'concept' in (2), on the one hand, and (5), on the other. As is well-known, 'concept' is used in two quite different ways in the philosophy of mind: it is used to stand both for mental representations — the mental analogue of linguistic expressions, i.e. a kind of internal bearer of content — and for the modes of presentation of objects and properties which are (on Fregean views of content) the contents of those mental representations. The problem is that neither interpretation makes both (2) and (5) true.

For suppose we interpret 'concept' in Heck's argument as meaning 'mental representation.' Then (2) looks reasonably plausible. But (5) looks extremely implausible. Saying that mental representations are parts of the contents of experience is a bit like saying that linguistic expressions are parts of the propositions expressed by the sentences in which they figure. In general, this simply won't be the case; 'Grass is green' is about grass and greenness, and not about 'grass' and 'green.'

So suppose we interpret 'concept' as meaning 'mode of presentation.' Then the problem is not with (5), but with (2). Modes of presentation just are not the sorts of things which 'need their reference fixed.' As understood by Frege, modes of presentation at least determine conditions of satisfaction, and thereby determine a reference — which is the thing, whatever it is, that meets the relevant conditions of satisfaction. We don't need to give modes of presentation conditions of satisfaction — they have these conditions of satisfaction essentially. And we don't need to determine what meets those conditions of satisfaction — that is fixed by what the world (or, more generally, the circumstance of evaluation) is like. So we don't need to explain how the reference of modes of presentation are fixed.

I don't think that this depends on any contentious theory of modes of presentation. We could, for instance, adopt the neo-Fregean semantics of epistemic two-dimensionalism, and think of modes of presentation as epistemic intensions. Once we have an epistemic intension of some expression in hand, we don't need to do anything else to 'fix its reference' — its reference is fixed by the idealized a priori connections that hold between the canonical description of the actual world and the application of that expression.

Since there is no interpretation of ‘concept’ 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 claim that we can demonstrate uninstantiated properties represented by our experience does not entail that experience is, in either sense of this term, nonconceptual.

So the conceptualist need not adopt any special views to escape Heck’s argument; that argument fails for reasons independent of any particular conceptualist or nonconceptualist thesis. Here I part company with fellow conceptualists, like Bengson, Grube, and Korman, who take Heck’s argument to be one of the most serious challenges to their position. Partly in response to this challenge, they posit nonconceptual states of property awareness that are independent of and irreducible to experiential representational states. They take themselves to be forced to posit such states because, as they put it,

“The content of E is meant to be *that o is thus*. The concept *thus* obviously cannot fix its own reference, nor is there any other constituent of the content of E that can fix its reference.”⁴

Here, as in Heck’s argument, we have concepts as things which both are constituents of the contents of experience and things which need to have their reference fixed. Modes of presentation satisfy the first condition but not the second, and mental representations satisfy the second condition but not the first. Nothing, as far as I can see, satisfies both.

2.2. Two versions of ‘the state view’

If there are two uses of ‘concept’ often in play in these discussions, we should expect that to show up as an ambiguity in the formulation of the ‘state view’ of nonconceptual content, since that view is stated in terms of the relationship between the concepts to which an experience is E-related and the concepts possessed by the subject of that experience. How would [NC_{STATE}] look if we removed the troublesome word ‘concept’, and replaced it with either ‘mode of presentation’ or ‘mental representation’?

If, as I think is more standard in this debate, we’re thinking of concepts as modes of presentation, then the following is a very natural disambiguation of [NC_{STATE}]:

$$[\text{NC}_{\text{MOP}}] \diamond [\exists M: M \text{ is a mode of presentation}] \exists S (S \text{ has an experience to which } M \text{ is E-relevant} \ \& \ \neg(S \text{ is able to have thoughts whose contents have } M \text{ as a constituent}))$$

Why all this talk about ‘modes of presentation’? Historically, the debate about conceptualist vs. nonconceptualist views of experience was carried out against the backdrop of the assumption that Fregean views of the content of thought were correct, and hence that the constituents of the contents of thoughts were Fregean senses — i.e., modes of presentation. But one can engage in this debate without making this

⁴ Bengson, Grube, & Korman (2011), 175.

assumption.⁵ We could recast $[NC_{MOP}]$ in a more general form by replacing references to modes of presentation with references to ‘constituents of contents of thoughts, whatever they are.’ In what follows I stick with $[NC_{MOP}]$ for simplicity, but readers who, like myself, are friendly to Russellian views of thought can make the relevant translations where necessary.

If $[NC_{MOP}]$ is the natural interpretation of $[NC_{STATE}]$ if we are using ‘concept’ to mean ‘mode of presentation’, what is the natural interpretation of this thesis if we are using ‘concept’ to mean ‘mental representation’? There is no immediate analogue, since mental representations are not the sorts of things which are E-relevant to experiences, and are at least typically not constituents of the contents of thoughts. But it’s not hard to find a thesis which is at least in the ballpark. The basic idea behind the state view is that there are at least sometimes concepts which bear some very close relationship to a subject’s experience without those concepts being in a correspondingly close relationship to that subject’s thoughts. This suggests something like the following interpretation:

$$[NC_{MR}] \diamond [\exists R: R \text{ is a mental representation}] \exists S (S \text{ has an experience which involves the tokening of } R \ \& \ \neg(S \text{ is able to have thoughts which also involve the tokening of } R))$$

If we presume that mental representations have the same content across their tokenings, then $[NC_{MR}]$ entails $[NC_{MOP}]$. But the converse does not hold — or at least not obviously. For nothing blocks the possibility that we are always able to have thoughts whose contents involve the modes of presentation which are E-related to our experiences because those experiences put us in a position to form new mental representations which inherit as their contents the modes of presentation which are parts of the contents of the experience.

Indeed, the truth or falsity of $[NC_{MR}]$ seems largely orthogonal to the debate about nonconceptual content. Participants in that debate were not debating — or at least did not seem to be debating — questions about whether numerically the same mental representations were active in perceptual experience and in thought. Rather, they were debating questions about the relationship between the contents of the mental representations active in experience and those active in thought.

Indeed, to deny $[NC_{MR}]$, one would have to make the quite surprising claim that it is metaphysically necessary that any being who tokens mental representations in experience can deploy numerically identical mental representations in thought. But there simply seems to be no reason why this should be a necessary truth about experiencing subjects; it seems, on the contrary, like a perfectly contingent property of subjects which, in any given case, could go either way. Hence, one might think, $[NC_{MR}]$ is false is not just orthogonal to the traditional debate about nonconceptual content, but also a rather weak, and hence uninteresting, claim.

⁵ See, e.g., Stalnaker (2003) and Speaks (2005).

Whether or not this is right, the distinction between two versions of the state view is irrelevant to the evaluation of Heck’s argument; the objection to that argument given above is independent of it. But it is a distinction which will be useful in understanding some of the arguments discussed below.

2.3. *Tye’s argument for nonconceptual content*

With these clarificatory remarks out of the way, let’s turn to Michael Tye’s argument for nonconceptual content. Tye presents it as an endorsement of Heck’s line of argument; but when restating it, actually gives a somewhat different argument. Here’s the relevant passage:

“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.”⁶

Tye is clear that he is using ‘concept’ to mean ‘mental representation.’⁷ And the fact that he is consistent in this usage explains the key difference between his version of the argument and Heck’s: whereas Heck takes the conceptualist to hold that perceptual demonstrative concepts are parts of the contents of experience, Tye takes the conceptualist to hold that *the contents of* perceptual demonstrative concepts are parts of the contents of experience. So Tye’s argument does not rely on any equivocation on ‘concept’; this seems like a good thing.

Tye’s argument also differs from Heck’s in its stated target. Tye says that he’s arguing for [NC_{STATE}] rather than [NC_{CONTENT}]; he says that an experience will be nonconceptual iff it has correctness conditions, and “the subject of E need not possess the concepts used in a canonical specification of [those] correctness conditions.”⁸ Whether he has in mind [NC_{MOP}] or [NC_{MR}] is a bit less clear; more on this below.

How should we reconstruct Tye’s reasoning? He seems to be distinguishing between three things: demonstrative concepts, their contents, and their referents. To fix ideas, let’s think about a perceptual experience (mis)representing some surface as some determinate shade of red. We can then distinguish between the demonstrative concept ‘that shade’, the mode of representation MOP(red₁₇) which is its content, and the color red₁₇, which is its referent. Then Tye’s argument can be thought of as having the following four premises:

⁶ Tye (2006), 523. Emphasis in original.

⁷ He defines concepts as “mental representations of a sort that can occur in thought” (506).

⁸ Tye (2006), 507.

- (i) ‘That shade’ has its reference fixed by the content of an experience.
- (ii) ‘That shade’ has $\text{MOP}(\text{red}_{17})$ as its content.
- (iii) $\neg[\text{NC}] \rightarrow$ the experience has $\text{MOP}(\text{red}_{17})$ as part of its content.
- (iv) If a demonstrative concept’s content is part of the content of an experience, its reference can’t be fixed by the content of that experience.

And (i)-(iv) jointly entail $[\text{NC}]$.

While Heck presents himself as arguing for $[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$ but gives an argument which only works if we assume that the proponent of $[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$ also holds $[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}]$, Tye presents himself as arguing for $[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}]$ but seems to assume that the proponent of $[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}]$ must also hold $[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$. For, if this were not true, it’s not clear why we should accept (iii). Is the defender of the state view, as such, committed to any particular claim about the sorts of things which are parts of the contents of experiences? It seems not — that was the whole point of Heck’s original distinction between the state and content views.

But for present purposes we can ignore this sort of problem, and simply (as with Heck) take Tye to be arguing against the conjunction of $[\text{NC}_{\text{CONTENT}}]$ and $[\text{NC}_{\text{STATE}}]$. The problem with Tye’s argument is not that it equivocates on ‘nonconceptual content’, or that it equivocates on ‘concept’ — the problem is that there seems to be no reason at all to accept premise (iv).

We know that modes of presentation are things which determine a reference. So if we could explain the fact that ‘that shade’ had $\text{MOP}(\text{red}_{17})$ as its content, that would suffice to explain the fact that ‘that shade’ refers to the color red_{17} . So the question is really whether the fact that the experience has $\text{MOP}(\text{red}_{17})$ as part of its content could be inconsistent with the idea that ‘that shade’ inherits its content from the experience. But why should these things be inconsistent? Surely, if ‘that shade’ is supposed to inherit some mode of presentation as its content from an experience, this is easier, not harder, to understand if that mode of presentation is actually part of the content of the experience. But then the punch line of Tye’s argument — “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” — is just a *non sequitur*.

To be sure, the way I’ve been discussing things over the last few paragraphs presupposes that we can distinguish the contents of mental representations from the properties they represent. But, even if this does seem to be implicit in Tye’s discussion of conceptualism, this is a picture of demonstrative concepts which one might (and I think should) reject. But Tye’s argument would fare no better on a Russellian conceptualist picture according to which there is no mode of presentation intervening between ‘that shade’ and the color which it represents. For on that sort of view, the conceptualist’s idea would just be that the content of ‘that shade’ is the color red_{17} , and that it inherits that content from the experience, which also has as part of its content the color red_{17} . As above, commonality in content between the demonstrative expression and the experience makes reference fixing of the former by the latter easier, not harder, to understand.

We can perhaps find a more plausible interpretation of Tye's argument by tracking the wording of the above passage less closely, and instead thinking about what Tye takes to be incoherent about the conceptualist picture of demonstrative reference. His worry seems to be one of circularity — that the conceptualist will be committed to some demonstrative mental representation having its reference fixed by itself. And Tye is surely right that if the conceptualist is committed to this conclusion, that amounts to a *reductio* of conceptualism.

If any sort of conceptualist thesis is going to be open to a *reductio* of this sort, it seems likely that it will be the denial of $[NC_{MR}]$. Here's one way in which the *reductio* might be constructed:

Suppose that $[NC_{MR}]$ is false. Then the demonstrative mental representation MR tokened when the subject has a demonstrative thought about red_{17} must also be the demonstrative mental representation tokened in the experience which represented the relevant surface as having red_{17} as its color. But in that case that the demonstrative mental representation — namely, MR — can't have its reference fixed by the content of that experience — for part of that experience's having that content was for MR to represent the color red_{17} . If it did not already have that content, there would have been nothing for the subject to demonstrate!

This does not quite fit what Tye says; he locates the problem in the claim that the *content* of the demonstrative mental representation is the same as (part of) the content of the experience rather than in the claim that the very same mental representation is tokened in the demonstrative thought and in the experience. But it's an interesting argument of the same general structure which fits Tye's use of 'concept' for 'mental representation'; so it's worth considering.

I think that this would be a good argument against $[NC_{MR}]$ if we could assume (with premise (2) of Heck's argument, and premise (i) of Tye's) that MR's reference had to be fixed by the content of the illusory experience in question. But if we are to assume that numerically the same mental representation is deployed in experience and in the subsequent demonstrative thought, there is no reason to accept that assumption. After all, the nonconceptualist, just as much as the conceptualist, owes some account of the contents of the mental representations deployed in experience. Tye, for example, will explain this in terms of a broadly covariational theory of content. Suppose that some such theory is correct. Then there seems to be no reason why one could not both deny $[NC_{MR}]$ and accept this theory. But then we would not have to appeal to the content of the experience in fixing the reference of MR — after all, on this sort of view, MR is itself tokened in experiences, and hence has its content (and reference) determined by our covariational theory of content. The initial dilemma — that the demonstrative mental representation must have its reference fixed by the sample in the world or by the content of the experience — gets no grip if that representation is itself tokened in the experience,

for then it can just get its content in whatever way any mental representation tokened in an experience gets its content.

Tye and Heck, in different ways, try to use the need for some account of reference-fixing to establish one or both of $[NC_{\text{CONTENT}}]$ and $[NC_{\text{MOP}}]$. We've seen that these arguments fail — Heck's due to an equivocation in the use of 'concept,' and Tye's due to an unmotivated assumption about the conditions under which one mental representation could inherit its content from another. We might try to reconstruct these arguments as arguments for the much weaker $[NC_{\text{MR}}]$ — but, as we've just seen, even here it is hard to see how to make this sort of argument work.

3. THE EXPLANATION OF CONCEPT ACQUISITION

A closely related, but I think more challenging argument, is to argue that conceptualism would make another explanatory role of experience — its role in learning certain concepts — mysterious. The best version of this sort of argument I know of is due to Adina Roskies.⁹ Her argument can be informally reconstructed in the terms set up above as follows:

We can learn the concept of red from experience. Take some experience E which plays this role in the life of some subject. If $\neg[NC_{\text{STATE}}]$, then E already involves concepts. Either E (i) already involves the concept of redness to be learned, or (ii) it doesn't. If (i), then E already involves the concept of redness whose learning was to be explained by E, and hence can't explain it. If (ii), then learning the concept of red on the basis of E must be a matter of compositionally building this concept out of other concepts which E does involve. But the concept of red is not compositionally built up out of other concepts. So whether we go route (i) or (ii), we can't explain learning of the concept of red on the basis of experience. So, if $\neg[NC_{\text{STATE}}]$, we can't learn the concept of red from experience. But we can. So, $[NC_{\text{STATE}}]$.¹⁰

As Roskies is well aware, the denier of $[NC_{\text{STATE}}]$ is likely to object that this argument neglects the role played by demonstrative concepts in learning the concept of red. In particular, the denier of $[NC_{\text{STATE}}]$ is likely to say something like what I said in the previous section: that an experience which represents some object as red₁₇ might explain our acquisition of a demonstrative concept 'that shade' for red₁₇, since 'that shade' might just inherit its content from the associated experience.

Roskies objects to this move as follows:

“The proper understanding of demonstrative concept formation requires that we recognize it as a psychologically sophisticated process. Demonstrative

⁹ See Roskies (2008), (2010).

¹⁰ See Roskies (2008), 637-8.

concept formation requires that attention is directed to and fixed upon the object or quality to be demonstrated. However, in order to appropriately focus attention, there must already be something articulated in our experience for us to focus our attention upon. ... We must therefore rely upon the deliverances of experience to provide us with content representing that object, in order to successfully delineate it with attention. Since, by hypothesis, this something in our experience cannot be conceptual, it must be nonconceptual. Thus, demonstrative concept formation itself requires nonconceptual content, so it cannot provide the conceptualist with a way to avoid recognition of nonconceptual content of experience.”¹¹

Roskies (2010) explores these problems with this ‘demonstrative response’ by the denier of [NC_{STATE}] in more depth, and gives a plausible defense of the view of demonstrative concept formation as ‘psychologically complex’ in the sense of the above quote.

My objection to this argument is not with this part of Roskies’ view of demonstrative concept formation; rather, it’s with her assumption that ‘by hypothesis, this something in our experience cannot be conceptual.’ In Roskies (2010), this assumption shows up as the premise that the level of representation which demonstrative concept learning presupposes “cannot always already be conceptual” (123), which she thinks of as a “logical point” (124) and hence does not defend. This premise is something of the following general form:

[R] If the content of E is already conceptual, then E cannot explain the acquisition of the concepts E involves.

Given the foregoing, we have some reason to be suspicious of plausible-sounding claims involving the term ‘concept’ (or ‘conceptual’). So let’s employ the strategy above, and ask whether [R] would be both plausible and useful in an argument for nonconceptualism using either of our two disambiguations of this term.

Suppose that we start first with the ‘mode of presentation’ interpretation, and construe Roskies as arguing for [NC_{MOP}]. Then ‘acquisition of a concept’ will be ‘acquisition of the ability to have thoughts whose contents involve the relevant modes of presentation.’ But, what, on this interpretation, will it mean for the content of E to be ‘already conceptual’?

One interpretation is that for an experience to be already conceptual is for its content to include the relevant modes of presentation. That gives us:

[R_{MOP-1}] If the content of E includes certain modes of presentation, then E cannot explain the subject’s ability to have thoughts involving those modes of presentation.

¹¹ Roskies (2008), 655-6.

But this is implausible — a point already familiar from our discussion of version (a) of Campbell’s argument — because there’s no obvious reason why a subject’s ability to have one sort of representational state with a certain content could not be explained in part by her having a different sort of representational state with that content.¹²

A better interpretation would be to say that for an experience to be already conceptual is for it to already involve the ability to have thoughts involving the relevant modes of presentation:

[R_{MOP-2}] If having E entails having the ability to have thoughts involving E-relevant modes of presentation, then E cannot explain the subject’s ability to have thoughts involving those modes of presentation.

But why should the fact that something entails an ability be inconsistent with it’s explaining that ability? One does not ordinarily object to explanatory claims on the grounds that the explanans is sufficient for the explanandum — quite the opposite!

One might object here that [R_{MOP-2}] ignores something which Roskies emphasizes: that demonstrative concept formation is an intentional act which requires the focusing of attention, and not something which simply happens automatically with the having of an experience. But if this is so, the objection continues, having an experience *can’t* entail the ability to have the relevant demonstrative thoughts, for one could surely have the relevant experience without focusing one’s attention in the right way and intentionally forming the relevant demonstrative concept.

But this objection ignores the distinction between possessing a concept — which is a matter of having the ability to have certain thoughts — and forming and deploying that concept — which is a matter of actually having those thoughts. The antecedent of [R_{MOP-2}] says that having an experience entails acquisition of the ability, not that having the experience entails actually forming and deploying the relevant demonstrative in thought.

One might think that this reply to the objection suggests an immediate way in which the objection might be repaired. For given the distinction between possessing a concept and forming a concept, one might think that the antecedent of [R_{MOP-2}] is simply too weak to capture the sense in which the denier of [NC_{STATE}] must think of experiences as already conceptual. For surely, as Roskies says in a related context, “[i]t is not enough for the conceptualist to demonstrate that the content of experience can always be *conceptualized*; he must show that the content of experience *is conceptual*.”¹³

One might then move to:

¹² It would also be dialectically odd, because this presumes that the denier of [NC_{STATE}] is also a denier of [NC_{CONTENT}] — for only the latter assumption commits one to a view about the contents of experience including the very same modes of presentation which can also be the contents of thoughts.

¹³ Roskies (2010), 117.

[R_{MOP-3}] If having E entails having thoughts involving the E-relevant modes of presentation, then E cannot explain the subject's ability to have thoughts involving those modes of presentation.

[R_{MOP-3}] is, unlike its predecessors, true: we can hardly explain someone's ability to φ in terms of his having φ 'd. But it's also useless in an argument for the conclusion that the denier of [NC_{STATE}] can give no account of concept learning, for the conceptualist will simply deny the antecedent of [R_{MOP-3}]. Conceptualist views of experience may be suspect for a variety of reasons, but it is no part of conceptualism that, for every property represented in one's experience, one actually has a demonstrative thought about that property.

If Roskies' argument fails against [NC_{MOP}], might it fare better against [NC_{MR}]? Even if it does, a conceptualist might, for the reasons sketched above, be less than worried about this, for most conceptualists want to deny [NC_{CONTENT}] and [NC_{MOP}] rather than a very weak claim about possible cognitive architectures like [NC_{MR}]. But in the end I doubt whether Roskies' argument establishes even [NC_{MR}].

If it were an argument for [NC_{MR}], the relevant premise would presumably be something like

[R_{MR}] If E involves the tokening of some mental representation M, then E cannot explain the ability to have thoughts which also involve the tokening of M.

Absent an account of what tokening a mental representation involves, this claim is a bit hard to evaluate. But nothing seems to rule out the possibility that subjects' tokening of certain mental representations in thought is causally explicable by prior tokenings of those mental representations in experience. Maybe, for example, they get their content by being tokened in an experience, and are only then available to be used with that content in thought. And if this is possible, then nothing seems to rule out the explanation of their ability to token those mental representations in thought in terms of their having tokened those mental representations in experience.

Here again Roskies might object that this neglects the fact that demonstrative concept formation is an intentional process which depends on, among other things, attention. But then the conceptualist who wishes to deny [NC_{MR}] is likely to invoke the above distinction between the ability to have thoughts and actually having those thoughts, and agree with Roskies that actually having thoughts which involve tokenings of the relevant mental representations depends on more than just having the experience: one also must intentionally focus one's attention on what that mental representation represents. But for reasons parallel to the above, this concession is not inconsistent with either the letter or the spirit of conceptualist views of experience. Conceptualists don't say that having an experience is sufficient for *having* certain thoughts; they just say that having an experience is sufficient for the ability to have those thoughts. One can, to use the standard if multiply ambiguous terminology, possess a concept without deploying it.

4. THE EXPLANATORY ROLE OF EXPERIENCE AND THE SCOPE OF PERCEPTUAL REPRESENTATION

If we reject the above sorts of arguments for the conclusion that the explanatory role of experience shows us that experience and thought differ in various fundamental ways, can we use the explanatory role of experience to show us anything about the nature of experience?

I think that we can. In particular, I think that a plausible case can be made that the role of experience in making contents available for thought can help us to decide questions about the scope of the contents of perceptual experience. Claims about the availability of contents are claims about the abilities of subjects. For a content to be available to a subject at t is for that subject to be able, at t , to have thoughts, beliefs, or other ‘cognitive’ mental states involving some propositions of which that content is a constituent.

Consider the following two principles about the relationship between the contents of a subject’s experiences and the thoughts available to that subject:

Availability/Difference

Necessarily, if two experiences differ in which thoughts they make available to the subject of the perception (holding fixed the background beliefs and cognitive abilities of the subjects), then they differ in content.¹⁴

The Availability Requirement

If an object or property is part of the content of a normal adult human subject’s experience at t , then that object or property is available for thought to that subject at t .

Neither principle is obvious; but, as I hope to show in what follows, they can both be given a plausible motivation and can, in different ways, be used to derive interesting conclusions about the scope of perceptual representation.

4.1. Why believe the principles?

Given the above explanation of what it means for an experience to make a thought available to a subject, I think that Availability/Difference is quite hard to deny. For suppose that two experiences have just the same content. Then they represent the world as being just the same way; they present just the same objects as having just the same

¹⁴ To see the importance of the parenthetical qualification, imagine a frog’s visual experience of a particular fly, and my experience of the same fly; and suppose that frogs are incapable of having *de re* thoughts about flies. Surely this difference between my cognitive capacities and that of a frog does not show that frogs can’t have visual experiences which represent particular flies as having certain properties, just as mine do.

properties. How — holding fixed background beliefs and other mental states — could one make available thoughts about an object or property which the other did not?

It's worth emphasizing the difference between Availability/Difference and the following stronger principle:

Necessarily, if two experiences differ in that one makes available a content F which the other does not (holding fixed the background beliefs and cognitive abilities of the subjects), then the first has F as part of its content and the other does not.

The intuitive case for Availability/Difference did not depend on this stronger principle — and that's a good thing, for this stronger principle is likely false. There seems nothing to block the possibility that acquiring the ability to have thoughts involving one content might (in conjunction with background mental states, perhaps) give one the ability to have thoughts involving some other content. But if this is in general possible, then there is nothing to block there being a pair of experiences which differ with respect to some content F , and hence also differ in that the first but not the second makes F available for thought to some subject — but also, in virtue of those differences, further differ in the fact that the first but not the second makes some distinct content G available for thought. (A plausible example might be a case in which G is a complex property which has as its constituents both F and some property H not represented by the experience.) The stronger principle above would license us to infer that G is part of the content of the first experience — Availability/Difference, fortunately, does not.

Let's turn to our second principle. Why think that the Availability Requirement is true? One simple argument for it is given by reflection on examples. Consider your present visual experience of the shapes and colors of objects around you. Can't you consider whether those objects really have *those* colors and *those* shapes? If so, then the color and shape properties presented in experience are available to you for thought.

If this seems to be true of representations of color and shape properties, then one might think that this generalizes to all perceptual representation of objects and properties. For any way your perceptual experience represents the world as being, can't you wonder whether it really is that way?

Indeed, one might think that this defense of the Availability Requirement shows not just that this thesis is true, but also that the following stronger thesis is true:

Demonstrative Availability

If a 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 property.

More on the difference between these below.¹⁵

4.2. *What can these principles show?*

Let's now turn to the question of what these principles, if true, show. We can locate views of the scope of perceptual representation on a spectrum from the relatively liberal (lots of surprising stuff gets in) to the relatively conservative (only colors, shapes, and other obvious sensible properties get in). Transparency/Difference can be used to argue for liberalizing conclusions about the content of experience; the Availability Requirement for conservative conclusions.

Let's consider the first line of argument first. Consider a pair of experiences of a pair of subjects, A and B. The two experiences are indiscriminable, and each is a visual experience of an unlabeled white golf ball against a green background. It's a reasonable assumption that these experiences, as so described, could be alike with respect to the perceptual representation of all properties of the golf ball, the background, and the relations between the two. So it is plausible that if the two experiences differ in content, they must differ in something other than the properties they represent as in the environment of the subject; and if this is so, the only candidate difference in representation seems to be a difference in the representation of the golf balls themselves.

But it seems that the two experiences do differ in content. Let's call the golf balls involved in the experiences, respectively, ball-A and ball-B. We can presume that, prior to their experiences, neither A nor B were able to have *de re* thoughts about either ball. (After all, you're currently not able to have *de re* thoughts about most of the golf balls currently in existence.) But things change with their visual experiences. During and after his experience of ball-A, A is able to have *de re* thoughts about ball-A. He can, for instance, judge *of that ball* that it is dimpled. Of course, he's in no position to do this of ball-B; he couldn't have *de re* thoughts about ball-B before his experience of ball-A, and it is hard to see how his experience of ball-A could have helped. And since the situations are symmetrical, B seems to be in just the opposite position with respect to the two golf balls.

But then it follows from Availability/Difference that the two experiences do differ in content: holding fixed the relevant facts about the two subjects, the two experiences

¹⁵ It might be worth adding a word about why the restriction to times is included in the statement of the Availability Requirement. Suppose that I'm at the store buying paint for my house, and am looking at a 5 x 5 array of color squares. While having the experience, I am able to have thoughts about each of the 25 colors; I can simply attend to it and then think about, e.g., whether that particular color is one that would look good on the staircase. But this ability might well be fleeting; I might individually consider each of the 25 colors in this way, but, 10 minutes later, after inspecting a few more 5 x 5 arrays, have lost the ability to have *de re* thoughts about the second color from the left in the fourth row of the first array. An example of this sort is discussed — though a different moral is drawn — in §3 of Kelly (2001).

nonetheless make available different *de re* thoughts to them.¹⁶ Hence the experiences differ in content.

And, once we get this far, it is hard to deny that the golf balls themselves are constituents of the contents of the relevant experiences. After all, how *else* could these contents differ, other than one containing ball-A and the other containing ball-B? It's very hard to deny that our two experiences differ in which thoughts they make available to their respective subjects; and it is also very hard to deny that the experiences are alike with respect to their representation of the properties of the golf balls.

Parallel conclusions about natural kinds follow by adapting the example in the obvious way.¹⁷

What about the alleged conservative consequences of the Availability Requirement? Consider the Shoemakerian view that experiences represent, in addition to colors, appearance properties. There are various views of what appearance properties are; on one plausible view, they are properties like that corresponding to the open sentence

x is disposed to cause red experiences in perceivers of type *T* in
circumstances *C*¹⁸

given some specification of the relevant type of perceiver and circumstance, where 'red' is a name for the phenomenal character typical of our experiences of red things. What values should we assign to '*C*' and '*T*'? It would be odd if they simply picked out the type of perceiver and circumstance of the experience of which they are part of the content, for then our representation of appearance properties would be infallible, and it would be impossible to represent an object's appearance properties as constant over an interval. So they had better not be too narrow. But they had better not be too broad, since they can't let a subject spectrum shifted or inverted relative to me fall under *T* — since then appearance properties would not make spectrum shift and inversion without misrepresentation possible, and hence would not do the job for which they were introduced in the first place.

The problem is that most normal color observers are in no position to specify, or have thoughts about, types of observers and circumstances which meet the constraints just outlined. The conflict is even more stark if we endorse Demonstrative Availability, as the relevant types are simply not there to be demonstrated.

So there appears to be a straightforward argument from the Availability Requirement to the falsity of appearance property-ism. Parallel arguments apply to some color relativist views, which are structurally similar to appearance property-ism. The same form of argument would also seem to make trouble for views, like Siegel's, which ascribe complex contents to experiences like those corresponding to the open sentence

¹⁶ This use of facts about which thoughts are made available by experiences to determine their contents runs parallel to Johnston's discussion of the objects of experience in Johnston (2004).

¹⁷ For more on this line of argument, see Speaks (2015), Chapters 16-20.

¹⁸ See Shoemaker (2000).

If S substantially changes her perspective on o, her visual phenomenology will change as a result of this change.¹⁹

This seems to violate the Availability Requirement, since it seems that subjects can see objects without being able to have thoughts about substantial changes in perspective or visual phenomenology. And, as with appearance property-ism, the contrast is even more obvious with Demonstrative Availability, since the perspective changes and phenomenology are not there to be demonstrated.²⁰

One might reply that arguments of this sort are too easy; perhaps they indicate that the Availability Requirement is just too strong. But, on the other hand, perhaps they put their finger on just what is wrong with views which supplement the usual array of sensible properties with surprising candidates for perceptually represented properties like appearance properties and perspectives.

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¹⁹ See Siegel (2006).

²⁰ For further discussion of this theme, see Speaks (2015), Chapters 21-23.

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