

Perception and Conceptual Content*

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Perceptual experiences justify beliefs—that much seems obvious. As Brewer puts it, “sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs” (this volume, xx). In *Mind and World* McDowell argues that we can get from this apparent platitude to the controversial claim that perceptual experiences have conceptual content:

[W]e can coherently credit experiences with rational relations to judgement and belief, but only if we take it that spontaneity is already implicated in receptivity; that is, only if we take it that experiences have conceptual content. (1994, 162)

Brewer agrees. Their view is sometimes called *conceptualism*; *nonconceptualism* is the rival position, that experiences have nonconceptual content. One initial obstacle is understanding what the issue is. What is conceptual content, and how is it different from nonconceptual content?

Section 1 of this paper explains two versions of each of the rival positions: *state* (non)conceptualism and *content* (non)conceptualism; the latter pair is the locus of the relevant dispute. Two prominent arguments for content *nonconceptualism*—the richness argument and the continuity argument—both fail (section 2). McDowell’s and Brewer’s epistemological defenses of content conceptualism are also faulty (section 3). Section 4 gives a more simple-minded case for conceptualism; finally, some reasons are given for rejecting the claim—on one natural interpretation—that experiences justify beliefs.

1. Two conceptions of conceptual and nonconceptual content

1.1 Concepts

Start with “concepts”. What are they, and what it is to “possess” one? The ‘concept’ terminology in the philosophical literature is at least three ways ambiguous, and often writers do not explicitly say which sense they have in mind. In the *psychological* sense, a concept is a mental representation of a category: something that is (literally) in the head,

* Many thanks to Jim Pryor, Susanna Siegel, Robert Stalnaker, and Matthias Steup; portions of sections 1 and 2 are adapted from Byrne 2002/3.

perhaps a (semantically interpreted) word in a language of thought. Thus, the mentalese word that applies to all and only horses, if there is such a thing, is the concept *horse*, or (in the more usual notation) HORSE. Someone possess HORSE just in case this mental representation is part of her cognitive machinery.

In the *Fregean* sense (pun intended), concepts are certain kinds of Fregean senses, specifically Fregean senses of predicates (e.g. ‘is a horse’). They are supposed to be constituents, together with other kinds of senses (e.g. senses of singular terms like ‘Seabiscuit’) of the senses of sentences (e.g. ‘Seabiscuit is a horse’), otherwise known as Fregean Thoughts. In the Fregean sense, to possess the concept *horse* is to grasp a Thought with the concept *horse* as a constituent. “Grasping” such a Thought may be glossed thus: believing that *p*, where ‘*p*’ is replaced by any sentence whose sense has the concept *horse* as a constituent.¹

In the *pleonastic* sense of ‘concept’, the primary locution is ‘possessing a concept’. Someone possesses the concept *F* iff she believes that...*F*... (for some filling of the dots). So, for example, someone who believes that Seabiscuit is a horse, or that horses are birds, or that all horses are horses, possesses the concept *horse*. Note that in the pleonastic sense, one might regard apparent reference to “the concept *horse*”, “the concept *round*”, etc., as a mere *façon de parler*, to be paraphrased away. If an entity is needed to serve as the concept *horse*, then the semantic value (whatever it might be) of the predicate ‘is a horse’ is the obvious choice.²

¹ This account of possessing the concept *horse* in the Fregean sense will do for present purposes, but it would not be acceptable to some Fregeans. According to Peacocke (1992), in order to possess a concept one must meet the concept’s “possession condition”, which “states what is required for full mastery of [the] concept” (29). It turns out that one may believe that Seabiscuit is a horse (for example), without having “full mastery” of the concept *horse*, and so without possessing it (1992, 27-33). Since ‘having full mastery of the concept *horse*’ and ‘possessing the concept *horse*’ are equivalent bits of jargon which cannot be explained in terms of belief, Peacocke in effect takes the notion of concept possession as primitive. A better proxy for this notion (although not an explanation of it) is this: someone possesses the concept *horse* (e.g.) iff it is *clearly true* that she believes the Thought that...horse... (for some filling of the dots).

² Because concepts are supposed to correspond to categories, the allowable substituends for ‘*F*’ are always restricted, although the restriction is rarely made explicit. The nature of the restriction can be left open here.

These three senses of ‘concept’ are very different. In the pleonastic sense, it is uncontroversial that there are concepts (at least if scare quotes are inserted around ‘there are’); in any event, it is uncontroversial that people possess concepts. But Fregeanism is controversial, and there are many controversies surrounding concepts in the psychological sense. Indeed, a behavioristically inclined philosopher might accept Fregeanism and deny that there are any concepts in the psychological sense. And of course one might accept that there are concepts in the psychological sense while rejecting Fregeanism.

The prominent participants in the debate over conceptual and nonconceptual content are Fregeans, and accordingly they use ‘concept’ in the Fregean sense. This should be borne in mind when reading various quotations. But, as will become apparent, the main considerations are independent of this assumption. For this reason (see also section 1.4), ‘concept’ is used here in the pleonastic sense unless explicitly noted otherwise; it is never used in the psychological sense.

1.2 Content

Next, “content”. Some mental states have content: the belief that Seabiscuit is a horse has the content that Seabiscuit is a horse; the hope that Seabiscuit will win has the content that Seabiscuit will win. Contents are *propositions*: abstract objects that determine possible-worlds truth conditions. Three leading candidates for such abstract objects are Fregean Thoughts, Russellian propositions (structured entities with objects and properties as constituents), and Lewisian/Stalnakerian propositions (sets of possible worlds). Sometimes ‘proposition’ is reserved exclusively for the contents of the traditional propositional attitudes like belief and hope; in this usage, if these contents are Thoughts (for example), then Russellian “propositions” are not propositions. In the terminology of this paper, ‘proposition’ is used more inclusively: in this usage, Russellian propositions might not be the contents of the traditional attitudes.

On one common view that forms the background to the conceptual/nonconceptual content debate, perceptual experiences, like beliefs and hopes, are representational mental states with content. A typical introduction of the idea is this:

A visual perceptual experience enjoyed by someone sitting at a desk may represent various writing implements and items of furniture as having particular

spatial relations to one another and to the experiencer, and as themselves as having various qualities... The representational content of a perceptual experience has to be given by a proposition, or set of propositions, which specifies the way the experience represents the world to be. (Peacocke 1983, 5)³

A visual illusion (e.g. an apparently bent stick in water) is, on this account of perception, much like a false belief. One's experience has the content that the stick is bent, but this content is false: the stick is straight. (As we will see in section 1.5, the preceding sentence will be qualified by a proponent of nonconceptual content.)

1.3 State conceptualism

Sometimes the notion of nonconceptual content is introduced along the following lines:

Mental state M has nonconceptual content p iff it is possible to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p,

where the concept *F* characterizes the proposition p iff p = that...F...⁴ If M does not have nonconceptual content, then it has *conceptual* content: anyone who is in M must possess all the concepts that characterize p.⁵

This way of talking is misleading. If M has “nonconceptual content” in the present sense, this does not imply that M has a *special kind* of content. In particular, if perceptual states have “nonconceptual content”, these contents might be the sort that are also the contents of belief (see section 1.5 below).

If the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction is explained in this fashion, it is much better to take it as applying to *states*, not to *contents*.⁶ Putting the distinction more

³ Peacocke 1983 assumes that the content of experience is conceptual. In later work defending the opposite view, Peacocke does not describe the content of experience as propositional (see the first paragraph in this section).

⁴ The allowable substituends for ‘F’ should be taken from Enriched English, containing all concept expressions that *could be* introduced into English (including, for example, possible adjectives for highly determinate shades of color like ‘brown₂₆’, ‘brown₁₇’, etc.). Similarly for ‘s’ in section 1.5 below.

⁵ Cf. Crane 1992, 143; Martin 1992, 238; Tye 1995, 139.

⁶ Note that as applied to contents, the distinction is not even guaranteed to be exclusive. Suppose M has nonconceptual content p, and that the content p could be believed (that is, there is such a mental state as the

hygienically: state M with content p is a *nonconceptual state* iff it is possible to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p.

1.4 Content conceptualism⁷

On another way of explaining the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction, the phrase ‘nonconceptual content’ isn’t at all misleading, because nonconceptual content really is a special kind of content. In the first instance it is explained negatively: nonconceptual content is *not* conceptual content, where the latter is either characterized as belief content, or as content with concepts in the Fregean sense as constituents.⁸

Content conceptualists assert, while content nonconceptualists deny, that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual:

According to the picture I have been recommending, the content of a perceptual experience is already conceptual. A judgment of experience does not introduce a new kind of content, but simply endorses the conceptual content, or some of it, that is already possessed by the experience on which it is grounded. (McDowell 1994, 48-9, note omitted)

As noted, the main players in the debate hold that the contents of belief are Fregean Thoughts. So for them, the characterization of conceptual content as belief content, and the characterization of it as Fregean content, are equivalent. But since it is not assumed here that belief content is Fregean, we need to choose one of these characterizations. Section 1.1 announced that ‘concept’ will be used in the pleonastic sense, and this was partly in anticipation of Brewer’s stipulation (this volume, xx, n.5) that conceptual content is *belief content*; given this stipulation, it is a substantive question whether conceptual content is also Fregean. Sometimes the stipulation is the reverse. Stalnaker

belief p). Then, because the belief p automatically “has conceptual content p”, p will be both “conceptual” and “nonconceptual”.

⁷ The useful ‘state/content’ terminology is borrowed from Heck 2000, 484-5.

⁸ Some theorists, notably Peacocke, go on to give a positive characterization. According to Peacocke, the nonconceptual content of experience is a combination of “scenario content” and “protopositional content”. These abstract objects are built to Russellian specifications: a protopositional content *is* a simple sort of Russellian proposition, while a scenario content is something more complicated, but likewise constructed from materials at the level of reference (Peacocke 1992, ch. 3). See also Evans 1982, 124-9.

(1998a) defends the view that the content of both belief and perception is “nonconceptual”, by which he means (at least) that it is not composed of Fregean concepts; in the (perhaps not ideal) terminology of this paper, Stalnaker’s view is content *conceptualism*.

Since everyone agrees that propositions expressed by sentences are of a kind that can be believed, *linguistic* content is automatically conceptual. Suppose that when one looks at a stick in water, the content of one’s experience is a certain proposition *p*. A nonconceptualist will deny that *p* is the proposition that the stick is bent. It is not an entirely unrelated proposition: perhaps *p* strictly implies that the stick is bent. But *p* is not a proposition that can be expressed by a sentence (e.g. ‘the stick is bent’), or named by a that-clause (e.g. ‘that the stick is bent’). Of course, this does not imply that *p* cannot be referred to at all; indeed, we have already referred to it (see also section 3.2).

According to *total* content nonconceptualism, the content of experience is exclusively nonconceptual; Evans seems to hold this view. According to *partial* content nonconceptualism, *every* perceptual state has some nonconceptual content—but at least occasionally a conceptual proposition will be one of the propositions that together comprise a perceptual state’s overall content. This is Peacocke’s position (1992, 88). Conceptualists typically hold that the content of experience is exclusively conceptual, so “partial content conceptualism” is rarely (if ever) an occupied position. In order to simplify the discussion, the focus will be on *total* content (non)conceptualism.

1.5 The relation between state and content conceptualism

State and content conceptualism (or nonconceptualism) are sometimes conflated; at any rate they are frequently not properly distinguished.⁹ What is the relation between the two views?

Suppose that (total) *content nonconceptualism* is true: if perceptual state *M* has content *p*, *p* is nonconceptual. So *p* ≠ that *s* (for any sentence replacing ‘*s*’), and hence *p* is not characterized by *any* concepts. It trivially follows that anyone who is in *M* must possess all the concepts that characterize *p*, and thus (according to the explanation in

⁹ As Stalnaker points out (1998a, 1998b); examples of confluations between state and content (non)conceptualism are neatly dissected in Speaks 2003.

section 1.3) that M is *conceptual*. So content nonconceptualism implies state conceptualism. But it is more natural to amend the account of section 1.3 by stipulating that as stated it only applies when p is characterized by some concepts, and adding that if M has *nonconceptual* content q, then M is a *nonconceptual* state. With this amendment adopted, content nonconceptualism entails state nonconceptualism; equivalently, state conceptualism entails content conceptualism. (This is of course not an exciting result, merely the consequence of a somewhat arbitrary stipulation.)

Suppose, on the other hand, that *state nonconceptualism* is true. One may be in perceptual state M with content p, even though one does not possess the concepts that characterize p—a fortiori, one does not believe p or doubt p. Still, p might be a perfectly ordinary proposition (e.g. that there is a purple octagon before one) of the sort that is the content of belief. So state nonconceptualism does not entail content nonconceptualism; equivalently, content conceptualism does not entail state conceptualism.

Since McDowell and Brewer's epistemological arguments are primarily intended to establish *content* conceptualism ('conceptualism', for short), this is our main topic.

2. The richness argument and the continuity argument

Why think conceptualism is false? This section briefly discusses two of the best known arguments.

2.1 The richness argument

The richness argument is present in embryo form in *The Varieties of Reference*.¹⁰ Heck elaborates it in this way:

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.... Before me now, for example, are arranged various objects with various shapes and colors, of which, it might seem, I have no concept. My desk exhibits a whole host of shades of brown, for which I have no names....—Yet my experience of these things

¹⁰ See 229 and 125, n. 9. A related argument is in Dretske 1981, ch. 6; however, plainly Dretske is arguing for something like *state nonconceptualism*.

represents them far more precisely than that, far more distinctively, it would seem, than any other characterization I could hope to formulate, for myself or for others, in terms of the concepts I presently possess. The problem is not lack of time, but lack of descriptive resources, that is, lack of the appropriate concepts (2001, 489-90).

The conclusion of this argument is nonconceptualism: “the content of perceptual states is different in kind from that of cognitive states like belief” (485).

This argument departs from the claim that a visual experience can represent shades of color (among other properties) “of which, it might seem, I have no concept”. Specifically, one can have a visual experience that represents that an object has a certain determinate shade of brown (brown_{17} , say) without possessing the concept brown_{17} . Let us set out the argument using Heck’s particular example.

Argument H

P1. Heck has a visual experience with content p ; p is true at a possible world w iff the desk is brown_{17} in w ; Heck does not believe that... brown_{17} (for any filling of the dots).

Hence:

C1. p is not *conceptual*; in particular, it is not the proposition that the desk is brown_{17} .
That is, nonconceptualism is true.

But C1 does not follow from P1. Assume, as Heck does, that the contents of beliefs are Thoughts. Then *one* possibility consistent with P1 is that p is (say) the possible worlds proposition that is modally equivalent to (but distinct from) the Thought that the desk is brown_{17} . But *another* possibility consistent with P1 is that p is simply the Thought that the desk is brown_{17} .¹¹

¹¹ See Byrne 1996, 264, n.6. The richness argument is opposed by McDowell (1994, 56-60; 1998) and Brewer (1999, 170-4) on the ground that demonstratives like ‘that shade’ can capture the content of color experience (see also Kelly 2001). However, McDowell and Brewer appear to concede that the argument provides a *prima facie* consideration in favor of (content) nonconceptualism.

2.2 *The continuity argument*

The continuity argument is also present in embryo form in *Varieties* (Evans 1982, 124).

Here is Peacocke's version:

Nonconceptual content has been recruited for many purposes. In my view the most fundamental reason—the one on which other reasons must rely if the conceptualist presses hard—lies in the need to describe correctly the overlap between human perception and that of some of the nonlinguistic animals. 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. The overlap of content is not just a matter of analogy, of mere quasi-subjectivity in the animal case. It is literally the same representational property that the two experiences possess, even if the human experience also has richer representational contents in addition. If the lower animals do not have states with conceptual content, but some of their perceptual states have contents in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual (2001b, 613-4).¹²

This argument may be set out as follows:

Argument P

P1. Humans do, and the lower animals do not, possess concepts.

Hence:

C1. Humans are in states (e.g. beliefs) with conceptual content, and the lower animals are not in states with conceptual content.

P2. Some of the perceptual states of lower animals have contents in common with human perceptual states.¹³

¹² Cf. Bermúdez 1998, chs. 3 and 4; McGinn 1989, 62. McDowell in effect denies P2 (1994, 64); see also Brewer 1999, 177-9.

¹³ The “lower animals” include cats and dogs, and perhaps monkeys and apes (Peacocke 2001a, 260).

Hence (from C1, P2):

C2. Human perceptual states have a kind of content that is not conceptual. That is, nonconceptualism is true.

P1 may be restated like this:

P1_(restated). Humans have beliefs, and the lower animals do not.

With this clarification of P1 made, it is unclear how it can support C1. On the face of it, one might reasonably hold P1 together with the view that perceptual content, in humans and lower animals, is the same kind of content that can be believed—thus denying C1. Further, P1 is quite disputable. The least unpromising line of argument for the claim that the lower animals lack beliefs attempts to link having beliefs with speaking a language. But, first, existing attempts to argue in this fashion are unconvincing and, second, Peacocke himself emphasizes the relative independence of language and thought.

An additional problem with the argument is the tension between P1 and P2. According to P1, the lower animals are radically unlike us cognitively: they neither know, think, or believe that this surface is brown. According to P2, the lower animals are importantly like us perceptually: the surface can appear to some of them *exactly* as it appears to some of us. Now Peacocke does not deny that the lower animals are in states *somewhat* like beliefs—“proto-beliefs”, say. And if proto-beliefs are available to the theorist of animal minds, presumably so are “proto-perceptions”, which do not overlap in content with genuine perceptions. If the lower-animals merely proto-believe, why don’t they merely proto-perceive?

3. Epistemological defenses of conceptualism

According to one traditional account of perception, it consists in the passive receipt of sensations (the Given), which then justify certain judgments—that an orange triangle is before one, for instance. In *Mind and World*, McDowell distills the idea of the Given thus: “the space of reason, the space of justification or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere” (7). This is unacceptable, according to McDowell, because it cannot explain how “experience [can] count as a reason for holding a belief” (14). “We cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgement is warranted except

as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification,..." (7).¹⁴ Nonconceptualism is a version of "the Myth of the Given" (51).

Brewer's *Perception and Reason* develops and extends McDowell's epistemic complaint against nonconceptualism. Brewer's basic argument is succinctly stated:

1. Sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs.
2. Sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content.

(CC) Sense experiential states have conceptual content. (this volume, xx)

McDowell's argument can be similarly outlined.

McDowell and Brewer make extensive use of the related notions of a subject's having a reason, a perceptual state's providing (or being) a reason, and so forth. Before proceeding further, talk of reasons need to be clarified.

3.1 Reasons

Someone might have a reason to believe that it will rain soon, for example. What sort of things *are* reasons (for belief)?¹⁵ One common and well-motivated answer is "propositions": that there are storm clouds on the horizon could be someone's reason to believe that it will rain soon, and so on. (See Unger 1975, 200-6; Williamson 2000, 194-200; Thomson 2001, 22-6.) McDowell uses the terminology of 'reasons' informally, Brewer less so. Although Brewer never explicitly says that reasons are propositions, he comes close enough:

...giving reasons involves identifying certain relevant propositions—those contents which figure as the premises and conclusions of inferences explicitly articulating the reasoning involved. (this volume, xx)

¹⁴ An appropriate ending for this sentence would be 'which hold between conceptual contents'. In fact, the sentence ends: "which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities". See note 20 below.

¹⁵ Brewer sensibly holds that reasons for belief and reasons for action are similar sorts of thing (e.g. 1999, 150). The latter will not be discussed here.

Reasons, we may say, are propositions. (Perhaps some propositions—the false ones, for instance—are not reasons.) A subject S *has* various reasons p_1, p_2, \dots ; if S has reason p, then that is a reason for S to believe some proposition q. Typically different reasons are reasons to believe different propositions: S might have reason p_1 to believe q_1 , and reason p_2 to believe q_2 , and yet not have reason p_1 to believe q_2 .

If p is one of S's reasons, must S believe p? Suppose S is planting his tomatoes, and there are storm clouds approaching, although they are so far away that S does not notice them. One might say that S has a reason—namely, that there are storm clouds approaching—to believe that it will rain soon, even though he does not believe that there are storm clouds approaching. On the other hand, there is certainly an important epistemological difference between believing and not believing one's reasons.

Some regimentation of terminology is required. Let us distinguish:

- (a) p is a reason *for* S to believe q.
- (b) p is a reason S *has* to believe q.
- (c) S's reason *for believing* q is p.

(Cf. Thomson 2001, 23-4.) On the proposed regimentation, (c) implies (b) which implies (a), and no converse implication holds.

Only (b) and (c) imply that S believes p. Suppose p = the proposition that there are storm clouds approaching, and that p is true but not believed by S. Then p is a reason *for* S to believe that it will rain soon (or so we may suppose), but p is not a reason S *has* to believe that it will rain soon.

Only (c) implies that S believes q; moreover, it implies (when $q \neq p$) that S's belief q is, in the usual terminology, “based on” his belief p (see, e.g., Pollock and Cruz 1999, 35-6). Suppose S has two reasons to believe that it will rain soon: that storm clouds are approaching, and that the barometer is falling. S might come to believe that it will rain soon *because* of the former reason, not the latter. If so, then the proposition that the barometer is falling is a reason S has to believe that it will rain soon, but is not S's reason for believing that it will rain soon. For completeness, we may stipulate that if q is a reason S *has*, then (one of) S's reasons for believing q is q itself.

One other piece of jargon needs explaining:

(d) S's mental state M supplies reason p for S to believe q.

When M is a perceptual state, the explanation of (d) should approximate the intended interpretation of Brewer's slogan that "sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs". Requiring (d) to entail that S *has* reason p to believe q would be too strong; merely requiring (d) to entail that p is a reason *for* S to believe q would be too weak. Splitting the difference, (d) may be (vaguely) explained thus: S's being in M puts S in a position to have a reason, namely p, to believe q. In other words: S's being in M makes reason p to believe q readily accessible to S.

A final point. Whether or not reasons are believed, they *can* be believed. So, although 'proposition' is used here widely, to include nonconceptual contents, this account of reasons as propositions makes them all conceptual.

As we will see, this regimented terminology does not exactly match either Brewer's or McDowell's usage; still, it ought to be adequate for formulating and evaluating their arguments.

3.2 An example

It will help to have a simple example of the sort of view that McDowell's and Brewer's arguments are intended to rule out. Pretend (solely for the sake of illustration) that the content of belief is Russellian, and imagine a nonconceptualist who holds in addition that the content of perception is Lewisian/Stalnakerian. Suppose a certain blue book *o* looks blue to S. According to our nonconceptualist, the content of S's experience is the possible worlds proposition that is true at a world *w* just in case *o* is blue in *w*, which we can take to be the set of worlds $\{w \mid o \text{ is blue in } w\}$. If S endorses the content of his experience, he will make a judgment with the content that *o* is blue, which we can take to be the ordered pair $\langle o, \text{blueness} \rangle$. As Evans says, this "process of conceptualization or judgement takes the subject from his being in one kind of informational state (with 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)" (1982, 227). The Russellian singular proposition $\langle o, \text{blueness} \rangle$ is, of course, modally equivalent to the possible worlds proposition $\{w \mid o \text{ is blue in } w\}$ that the nonconceptualist claims is the content of S's experience. We may suppose that our nonconceptualist agrees with Brewer's first premise ("Sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs"): she holds that

perceptual states, although they have nonconceptual content, supply (conceptual) reasons for belief. Further suppose—in what amounts to a concession to Brewer and McDowell—that our nonconceptualist endorses a very strong reading of Brewer’s first premise. She holds that perceptual states are *intrinsic* suppliers of reasons—they do not supply reasons only when other contingent conditions obtain. In particular, our nonconceptualist affirms:

(*) Necessarily, if *o* looks blue to S, then S is in a position to have a reason to believe that *o* is blue.¹⁶

Let us now examine whether our nonconceptualist can fend off McDowell’s and Brewer’s arguments.

3.3 McDowell

Mind and World contains a number of rather compressed objections against nonconceptualism.¹⁷ One is this:

In the reflective tradition we belong to, there is a time-honoured connection between reason and discourse...Peacocke [a representative nonconceptualist] cannot respect this tradition. He has to sever the tie between reasons for which a subject thinks as she does and reasons she can give for thinking that way. Reasons the subject can give, in so far as they are articulable, must be within the space of concepts. (1994, 165)

This suggests that if S has a reason *p* to believe *q* (or, perhaps, if S’s reason for believing *q* is *p*) then S must be able to give—that is, *state*—the reason. This immediately implies that S’s reason is conceptual—if S can utter some sentence that expresses the proposition that is his reason, then since propositions expressed by sentences are conceptual contents, S’s reason is conceptual.

But *our* nonconceptualist accepts that *all* reasons, whether articulable or not, are within the space of concepts. So, whatever McDowell’s complaint is, it cannot be put in

¹⁶ Perhaps S would not be “in a position to...” unless he possessed the concept *blue*; if so, add that he does.

¹⁷ Apart from Brewer 1999, other important discussions of McDowell’s arguments include Heck 2000, 511-20, and Peacocke 2001a, 255-6.

the terminology of this paper by saying that, according to the nonconceptualist, reasons are not conceptual.

One premise of McDowell's argument is evidently that reasons must be "articulated". We might therefore begin to set out the argument as follows:

Argument M1

P1. If someone's reason for believing p is q , she is in a position knowingly to assert that she has reason q to believe p .

P1 is probably a stronger formulation of the "articulation" requirement than McDowell intends; in any case it is hardly obvious. But we can postpone the issue of whether P1 is true: as will be argued shortly, the main problem with Argument M1 is elsewhere.

Suppose that S in the example of section 3.2 goes on to form the belief that o is blue. What is S 's reason for believing this? McDowell continues:

I do not mean to suggest any special degree of articulateness... But suppose one asks an ordinary subject why she holds some observational belief, say that an object within her field of view is square. An unsurprising reply might be "Because it looks that way". That is easily recognized as giving a reason for holding the belief. Just because she gives expression to it in discourse, there is no problem about the reason's being for which..., and not just part of the reason why.... (165)

This suggests that S 's reason to believe that o is blue is the psychological proposition that o looks blue (to S).¹⁸ And of course this is superficially attractive. So this gives us the second premise:

P2. S 's reason for believing that o is blue is that o looks blue.

Hence (from P1, P2):

C1. S is in a position knowingly to assert that S 's reason for believing that o is blue is that o looks blue.

¹⁸ As McDowell exegesis, this is wrong (see note 21 below); but it is instructive to proceed as if it were right.

Now the task is to get from C1 to the falsity of nonconceptualism. If C1 is true, S is in a position to know what his reasons are, and that his belief that *o* is blue is “based on” his belief that *o* looks blue. But why can’t the nonconceptualist accommodate these pieces of self-knowledge as well (or as badly) as the conceptualist? Once it is clear that the nonconceptualist agrees (or should agree) that *reasons* are conceptual, the articulation requirement seems beside the point. Argument M1 is going nowhere.

A paragraph later McDowell apparently introduces a new consideration:

The routine point is really no more than that there can be rational relations between its being the case that P and its being the case that Q (in a limiting case what replaces “Q” can simply be what replaces “P”). It does not follow that something whose content is given by the fact that it has correctness condition that P can *eo ipso* be someone’s reason for, say, judging that Q, independently of whether the content is conceptual or not. We can bring into view the rational relations between the contents...only by comprehending the putatively grounding content in conceptual terms, even if our theory is that the item that has that content does not do its representing in a conceptual way. A theory like Peacocke’s does not credit ordinary subjects with this comprehensive view of the two contents, and I think that leaves it unintelligible how an item with the non-conceptual content that P can be someone’s reason for judging that Q. (1994, 166, note omitted)¹⁹

¹⁹ This quotation is rather loosely expressed, which might be partly responsible for McDowell’s allegation of unintelligibility. McDowell’s ‘P’ and ‘Q’ are schematic *sentence* letters. Any instance of McDowell’s last schematic sentence will have a declarative sentence in place of ‘P’. For instance: “...that leaves it unintelligible how an item with the nonconceptual content that *o* is blue can be someone’s reason...”. But, as noted earlier in section 1.4, sentences (e.g. ‘the book is blue’) express conceptual contents. In other words, there is no such thing as “the non-conceptual content that *o* is blue”. A more precise reworking of McDowell’s last sentence would be: “...leaves it unintelligible how an item with the non-conceptual content p can be someone’s reason for judging q”. Here the schematic letter ‘p’ may be replaced by a singular term (perhaps a description) referring to a particular nonconceptual content—for instance, in our simple example, ‘{w | *o* is blue in w}’—and ‘q’ may be replaced by a “that-clause”—for instance, ‘that *o* is blue’.

One argument suggested by this passage does not appeal to the claim that reasons must be articulated, or that S's reason is a psychological proposition. In our terminology, the crucial idea is to link *supplying reason p* with *having content p*:

Argument M2

P1. S's perceptual state supplies a reason for S to believe that *o* is blue.

P2. If S's perceptual state supplies a reason for S to believe that *o* is blue, then this reason is the content of S's perceptual state.

Hence (from P1, P2, given that reasons are conceptual):

C1. S's perceptual state has conceptual content.

Our nonconceptualist is about as well-placed as the conceptualist to accommodate P1. If S's perceptual state is a "mere sensation", then it certainly seems puzzling how it might supply a reason to believe that *o* is blue, as opposed to, say, that *o* is red, or that some other object *o** is square, or whatever (see Steup 2001, Pryor this volume). However, our nonconceptualist, like the conceptualist, denies that S's perceptual state is a mere sensation: it has content, and moreover content that *strictly implies* that *o* is blue. So the nonconceptualist's position that S's perceptual state supplies a reason that is *not* the content of the state seems perfectly defensible, which is to say that P2 is quite doubtful.

3.4 Brewer

We have assumed that McDowell is a *content* conceptualist (see the quotation above in section 1.4). In fact, this attribution is somewhat problematic, because content conceptualism does not appear to be equivalent to McDowell's other characterizations of his view.²⁰ Matters are clearer with Brewer:

²⁰ His more usual style of explanation in terms of "capacities": "It is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking....When I say the content of experience is conceptual, that is what I mean by "conceptual"" (1994, 47). But the connection between capacities and content is unclear (cf. Stalnaker 1998a, 105-6).

[A] *conceptual state*—that is to say, a mental state with *conceptual content*—is one whose content is the content of a possible *judgement by the subject*. (this volume, xx)

So Brewer’s slogan that “sense experiential states have conceptual content” implies that they have content of the sort that can be believed (or judged), and so implies content conceptualism. Hence, whatever else Brewer wants to add (see the sentence in his paper immediately following the one just quoted), for present purposes we can take this to be the conclusion of his argument.

Return to the example of section 3.2. What, according to Brewer, is S’s reason for believing that *o* is blue?

As we saw in the previous section, there is some indication that McDowell takes it to be the proposition that *o* looks blue (to S). Brewer, however, thinks otherwise. Generalized, the view that S’s reason for believing that *o* is blue is that *o* looks blue (to S) amounts to this: one’s perception based knowledge of one environment rests on a foundational layer of reasons concerning one’s psychology. As Brewer argues at length in *Perception and Reason* (ch. 4; see also this volume xx-yy), this “second order view” is a disastrous model of perceptual knowledge, not least because it tacitly presumes a dubious account of self-knowledge. Of course, Brewer does not deny that that propositions about how things appear are sometimes among one’s reasons for believing propositions about one’s environment: for instance, if a certain book looks dark blue, that might be a reason for believing that the illuminant is a tungsten bulb, rather than a fluorescent one. And presumably the proposition that an object looks blue is often *among* the reasons one has to believe that it is blue. But this reason is not particularly important—typically one does not need to have it in order to know that an object is blue.²¹

The proposition that *o* looks blue to S having been excluded, there is only one remaining candidate for the proposition that is S’s reason (or, at least, S’s important

²¹ And McDowell agrees (1995); see also Heck 2000, 516-9. The answer ‘Because it looks blue’ to the question ‘How do you know it is blue?’ is appropriate because it gives the *source* of one’s reasons, rather than a statement of them (see Byrne 2004).

reason): the proposition that *o* is blue. So we may take Brewer to hold that this proposition is S's reason for believing that *o* is blue. How do we get from this to the desired conclusion, namely that the nonconceptualist is mistaken, because the content of S's experience is the proposition that *o* is blue?

These must be the subject's *own* reasons, which figure as such *from his point of view*. It follows from this, first, that the subject's having such a reason consists in his being in some mental state or other, although this may be essentially factive. For any actually motivating reason *for the subject* must at the very least register at the personal level in this way. Second, it also follows that it cannot be the case that the proposition, reference to which is required...in characterizing the reason in question, can merely be related to the mental state of the subject's *indirectly*, by the theorist in some way. Rather, it must actually be the content of his mental state in a sense which requires that the subject has all of its constituent concepts. Otherwise...it cannot constitute his *own reason*...[Thus, sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content...] (1999, 152, note omitted; square bracketed quotation from this volume, xx)

Concentrating on our subject S, one version of Brewer's argument is this:

Argument B1

P1. S has a reason (namely: that *o* is blue) to believe that *o* is blue. (Added for emphasis: this is S's *own reason*, etc.)

P2. S's having a reason consists in S's being in some mental state.

Hence (from P1, P2):

C1. S's having a reason (namely: that *o* is blue) to believe that *o* is blue consists in S's being in some mental state M.

P3. This mental state M has the proposition that *o* is blue as its content. ("It must actually be the content of his mental state...Otherwise...it cannot constitute his *own reason*")

Now this mental state M must be S's perceptual state, so:

C2. S's perceptual state has the content that *o* is blue, and hence has conceptual content.

P2 might be questioned, but the main problem with the argument is the last step. Suppose we grant that there is a mental state M, being in which *constitutes* S's having a reason to believe that *o* is blue. What could M be? To have a reason *p* is (at least) to believe *p*, so S's being in M has to entail that S believes that *o* is blue. An obvious candidate for M is simply the state of believing that *o* is blue; another less obvious but more plausible candidate is the state of knowing that *o* is blue, neither of which is S's perceptual state. (Recall Brewer's remark that the state may be "essentially factive", and see Unger 1975, 206-11, Williamson 2000, ch. 9.)

Perhaps, though, we should concentrate on a case where S does not endorse the content of his experience. He does not *believe* that *o* is blue, and hence does not *have* a reason to believe that *o* is blue, but (we are supposing) nonetheless is *in a position* to have a reason. This leads to another version of the argument:

Argument B2

P1. S is in a position to have a reason (namely: that *o* is blue) to believe that *o* is blue.

P2. If S is in a position to have a reason to believe that *o* is blue, this is because one of S's mental states M supplies this reason.

Hence (from P1, P2):

C1. S's mental state M supplies a reason (namely: that *o* is blue) for S to believe that *o* is blue.

P3. If S's mental state M supplies a reason, that reason is the content of M.

From C1 and P3, it follows that M, whatever it is, has the content that *o* is blue. Further, M must be S's *perceptual* state (because S does not *believe* that *o* is blue, etc.). So:

C2. S's perceptual state has the content that *o* is blue, and hence has conceptual content.

Here the weakest link is P3. If the only alternative is that M has *no* content, then P3 might be attractive. But another alternative is that M has the nonconceptual content {w | o is blue in w} (recall the previous section's discussion of Argument M2).

So far we have assumed that Brewer's insistence that "sense experiential states provide reasons...[that are] the subject's *own* reasons, which figure as such *from her point of view*" (this volume, xx) is accommodated by the claim (in our terminology) that perception *supplies* reasons. That is (again in our terminology), perception puts the subject in a position to *have* reasons. Unfortunately that is not quite right.

One reason for suspecting that Brewer has something more in mind is the presence in the above quotation of the phrase 'as such'. And later he writes that his argument

rests upon the requirement that reasons for the subject, must be recognizable as such, and susceptible to rational scrutiny and evaluation *by her*. (this volume, xx)

Brewer labels this the "recognition requirement" (see also 1999, 19, n.2). It should bring to mind McDowell's demand that a subject should be able to "articulate" her reasons, and indeed Brewer views the recognition requirement as one way of developing McDowell's point (1999, 163).

The just-quoted statement of the recognition requirement suggests that if a subject has reason p to believe q, she must be able to recognize this fact. If so, the recognition requirement is basically a non-linguistic version of P1 in Argument M1 (to get something approximating to the recognition requirement, replace P1's 'to knowingly assert' with 'to recognize').²²

However, we have already seen that McDowell's "articulation requirement" seems to be of little help in deriving conceptualism. If the recognition requirement is just

²² See also this volume, xx, where a nonconceptualist attempts to meet the recognition requirement by formulating an argument with the conclusion "I have a reason to believe that p".

a weaker version of the articulation requirement, then it will be no more helpful. And, in any case, this version of the recognition requirement is very implausible.²³

However, on closer examination the recognition requirement appears to be something quite different. In *Perception and Reason* Brewer notes the distinction between

a person's simply making a transition [in thought] in a way which happens to accord with the relevant norms and her being guided by such norms in what she does. (165)

In our terminology this is more-or-less the distinction between: (a) believing *q*, *having* reason *p* to believe *q*, but not believing *q for* the reason *p*, and: (b) believing *q for* the reason *p*; a specific example of each was given in section 3.1.

Starting from this distinction, Brewer then argues for the recognition requirement:

[I]t is central to this distinction, between action in accord with a rule and genuine rule-following, that in the latter case [the subject] is guided in making the transition by recognition of her reason *as a reason for doing so*... In other words the condition which forms the starting point of the present line of argument does indeed obtain [i.e. the recognition requirement is true]: genuinely reason-giving explanations cite reasons which in some sense are necessarily recognized as such by the subject. (166)

Here it appears that terminology of “recognizing reasons as such”, “in some sense”, is supposed to be a notational variant of the terminology of “being guided by” reasons. If so, then the recognition requirement can be stated as follows: any genuine reason-giving explanation (where the explanandum is that *S* believed *p* and *q* is the reason) implies that *S* believed *p for* the reason *q*. We may grant that this is true; but it seems much too weak to do any heavy lifting in an argument for conceptualism.

²³ In the first place, both everyday life and empirical psychology indicate that subjects are often poor at recognizing their reasons. In the second place, the recognition requirement as stated is objectionable on more philosophical grounds (see especially Williamson 2000, ch. 8).

4. *Do experiences have conceptual content?*

So far we have not come across any persuasive considerations in favor of either conceptualism or nonconceptualism. Is the pessimistic conclusion that the issue is at a standoff?

One initial reason for optimism is that conceptualism should be the default position. All parties agree, in effect, that perceiving is very much like a traditional propositional attitude, such as believing or intending; the issue is whether the contents or propositions that perceiving is a relation to are conceptual. When it is put like that, nonconceptualism is decidedly puzzling. When one has a perceptual experience, one bears the perception relation to a certain proposition *p*. The nonconceptualist claims that it is impossible to bear the *belief* relation to *p*—but why ever not? Absent some argument, the natural position to take is that the contents of perception can be believed. (This unappetizing feature of nonconceptualism is somewhat obscured because participants in the debate typically reserve ‘proposition’ for *conceptual* contents.)

A second consideration is this. As noted in section 3, McDowell disparages nonconceptualism as another version of the Myth of the Given, and the comparison is particularly apt. The traditional Given is ineffable, a feature shared by nonconceptual content. The nonconceptual content of experience is not *thinkable*—and it cannot be whistled either. Reflecting on one’s experience, one might have some inchoate suspicion that there is something special about its content, and often this seems to motivate nonconceptualism. Yet any such motivation is doubtfully coherent. Distinguish between thinking *about* a proposition (e.g., “<*o*, blueness> is a singular proposition”, “The proposition Bill asserted is controversial”, etc.) from (merely) thinking *with* a proposition (e.g. “*o* is blue”, “Experience has conceptual content”). When one thinks *with* *p*, one’s thought has *p* as its content (or as part of its content). According to the nonconceptualist one can only think *about* the content of one’s experience—“The content of my present experience is true iff *o* is blue” is not a thought *with* the content of one’s experience. But then it is very hard to see how reflection on experience could possibly lead one reasonably to suspect that its content is nonconceptual. One starts with a thought like “It appears to me that my environment is thus-and-so”, and ends with something like “So I suppose the content of my experience is rich/perspectival/phenomenal/nonconceptual...”.

If the premise is to have any bearing on the conclusion, the content one ends up thinking *about* must be the content one started thinking *with*, in which case no sensible conclusion can be that the content is nonconceptual.

For one more objection, recall the distinction made in section 1.4 between *total* and *partial* nonconceptualism. To simplify matters, the discussion so far assumed that the dispute was between the total conceptualist and the total nonconceptualist. But is total *nonconceptualism* at all plausible? Imagine some very basic case of seeing that *p*, where one would say without any reservation that the proposition that *p* specifies, at least in part, how things visually strike one: seeing that *o* is blue, for example. Given the rather abbreviated way in which the notion of perceptual content is usually introduced, we lack any grip on what it would mean to *deny* that the proposition that *o* is blue is part of the content of one's experience.²⁴

Is the *partial* nonconceptualist any better off? She might well agree that when one *sees that o* is blue, that proposition is always part of the content of one's experience (cf. Peacocke 1992, 88). But she must hold that *some* experiences have exclusively nonconceptual content (say, in the example of section 3.2, the possible worlds proposition {*w* | *o* is blue in *w*}). We may suppose the partial nonconceptualist claims that when *o* looks blue to *S*, but he does not see that *o* is blue (perhaps because *o* isn't blue), the content of *S*'s experience is exclusively nonconceptual. However, the retreat to partial nonconceptualism does not help. We are told that: (a) the content of experience captures the way things perceptually appear to the subject; (b) when *S* sees that *o* is blue the content of his experience includes the proposition that *o* is blue; and (c) when *o* looks blue to *S* this proposition is not part of the content of his experience. But, surely, in case (b) and (c) things appear the same way to *S*, which conflicts with (a).²⁵

Finally, let us briefly revisit the strong interpretation of Brewer's first premise which was foisted on the nonconceptualist. Restricted to the specific example of section 3.2, this interpretation was:

²⁴ One example of an explanation of perceptual content is the quotation from Peacocke in section 1.2; another is in Harman 1990, 264.

²⁵ Stalnaker 1999 and Speaks 2003 provide other reasons for content conceptualism (although they wouldn't put the conclusion that way).

(*) Necessarily, if *o* looks blue to S, then S is in a position to have a reason to believe that *o* is blue.

The idea behind (*) is this: there is an *intrinsically rational* transition (akin to a rational inference) between S's visual experience as of *o*'s being blue, and S's judgment that *o* is blue. Nonconceptualists often seem to endorse something along these lines.

(*) is a rather perplexing thesis. If *o* *merely* looks blue, why should that put one in a position to have *any* reason to believe that it is blue? Is testifying that *o* is blue a positive consideration all by itself? Shouldn't the witness have some other qualifications? Granted, S's state represents that *o* is blue, so the accusation that the state is just arbitrarily connected with the proposition that *o* is blue is misplaced. Nonetheless, fending off the arbitrariness charge does not amount to a positive defense of (*).

One might try to support (*) by contemplating a counterfactual situation in which absolutely nothing has any color, and yet objects look colored to S; in particular, *o* looks blue to S. It is often claimed that in any such situation S is in a position to have a reason to believe that *o* is blue. However, this is arguably an overreaction to the fact that it would be perfectly understandable for S to believe that *o* is blue—S would be *epistemically blameless* for having this belief. (For some relevant discussion, see Pryor 2001, 114-8; Sutton forthcoming.)

Let us widen the issue by considering a schematic and more general version of (*):

(*⁺) Necessarily, if *o* looks blue to S and condition C obtains, then S is in a position to have a reason to believe that *o* is blue.

Uncontroversially true instances of (*⁺) are obtained by replacing 'condition C obtains' with 'S sees that *o* is blue', 'S knows that *o* is blue', 'S has a reason to believe that *o* is blue', etc. Is there an instance of (*⁺) that is: (a) an expression of the intuitive idea that experiences justify belief; (b) controversial; (c) true? For short; does (*⁺) have *interesting* instances? Yes, according to the proponent of (*); they will say C is the vacuous condition. Yes, according to some reliabilists; they will explain C in terms of causal or counterfactual dependencies between *o*'s color and the way *o* looks to S.

But it is not clear why interesting instances of (*⁺) are needed, in which case the search to find one may be called off. Suppose we take on board Brewer's point that perception can deliver knowledge of the colors of objects (say) without the support of reasons concerning how things appear. If one is sufficiently sophisticated, one can also know how things appear; combining the two, one can come to know that blue objects typically look blue. Hence, when one next recognizes that an object looks blue, one has a reason to believe that it is blue—even if it is *not* blue. Thus, simply assuming innocuous instances of (*⁺), we can explain the contingent fact that when an object looks blue, one's perceptual state supplies one with a reason (perhaps not a very strong reason) to believe that the object is blue. What more needs explaining?

It must be emphasized that interesting instances of (*⁺) are not being attributed to either Brewer or McDowell.²⁶ But if none is correct, then there is no true and exciting interpretation of the slogan that started this paper. In fact, it is more economical to reserve the slogan for a substantive epistemological claim. And if we do, the moral is this: experiences have conceptual content; yet, while we often know things by perception, experiences do not justify beliefs.

²⁶ For Brewer's sophisticated and complex account of the sense in which experiences justify beliefs, see Brewer 1999, ch. 6, and the helpful discussion in Martin 2001.

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