

Is there a problem about nonconceptual content?

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1	Two understandings of “nonconceptual content”	1
2	The case for nonconceptual content	4
3	Absolute nonconceptual content	5
	3.1 What would it mean for perceptions to have different kinds of contents than thoughts and beliefs?	5
	3.2 Arguments for the absolute nonconceptual content of experience	6
	3.3 McDowell’s conceptualist alternative	13
	3.4 What we should say about absolute nonconceptual content	15
4	Relative nonconceptual content	16
	4.1 What is a theory of concept possession?	17
	4.2 Arguments for the relative nonconceptual content of experience	18
	4.3 What we should say about relative nonconceptual content	25
5	Conclusion	26

Recently, there has been a great deal of discussion about whether the contents of experience are conceptual or nonconceptual. At bottom, this is an issue about the relationship between thought and perception. While this relationship is a fundamental one, its nature has been obscured by a number of confusions and false presuppositions at work in the debate over nonconceptual content. A first step in understanding the relationship between thought and perception is therefore clarificatory; and a good place to begin is with the question of what ‘nonconceptual content’ might mean.

1 Two understandings of “nonconceptual content”

It is clear that when theorists claim that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual, they are making some sort of distinction between the perceptions and other propositional attitudes, like beliefs. But this is hardly enough to make sense of this debate; it is, after all, uncontroversial that there are many important differences between perception and belief, just as there are many important differences between belief and knowledge, or between belief and desire. What we need is a characterization of what distinctive difference is being claimed to hold between perception and belief.

We can distinguish two senses in which the contents of perceptions might be nonconceptual. The first sense of the claim says something about the sort of contents perceptions have: it claims that those contents have a certain monadic property, the property of being

nonconceptual. This formulation immediately raises the problem of saying what this property is. Here there are a number of possibilities; it might be that the contents of beliefs have a kind of structure that the contents of perceptions lack, or that the constituents of the contents of beliefs are concepts or Fregean senses, whereas the constituents of the contents of perceptions are objects and properties. For now, we can bypass this choice by defining the thesis of the proponent of this kind of nonconceptual content in terms of a difference in kind between the contents of perceptions and the contents of ‘conceptual’ states like belief and thought.¹ Since this is a claim about the natures of the contents of perception, I shall call this *absolute* nonconceptual content:

A mental state has *absolutely nonconceptual content* iff that mental state has a different kind of content than do beliefs, thoughts, etc.²

Sometimes, however, the claim that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual is glossed, not as the claim that the contents of experience have a certain monadic property, but rather as the claim that a certain relation holds between that content and the agent doing the perceiving. Specifically, it is claimed that agents can have some content presented to them in perception without *possessing* or *grasping* that content. Since this is a claim not about the nature of the contents of perceptual states, but rather about the relations between those contents and agents, I shall call this *relative* nonconceptual content:

A mental state of an agent *A* (at a time *t*) has *relatively nonconceptual content* iff the content of that mental state includes contents not grasped (possessed) by *A* at *t*.³

One problem in understanding the debate about nonconceptual content is that the claims that perceptual content is absolutely and relatively nonconceptual are often run together. A representative passage may be found on the first page of Michael Martin’s “Perception, Concepts, and Memory.” Martin sets up the topic by saying

“Denying that experience is the same kind of attitude as belief does still allow one to suppose that the two kinds of mental state are nevertheless both attitudes to the same kind of content. The question I wish to raise here is whether that supposition is correct.” (745)

This sounds as though the issue to be raised is whether the contents of perceptions are absolutely nonconceptual — whether perceptual states are attitudes toward the same kind of content as ‘conceptual’ states like belief. But one paragraph later Martin states the question to be answered as follows:

¹This more or less follows the dialectic as it is pursued in the literature; a notable exception is Stalnaker 1998, in which it is argued that the contents of both belief and perception are nonconceptual. I’ll return to the question of what it might mean to say that the contents of both perception and thought are either conceptual or nonconceptual below.

²Heck (2000) is explicit in his endorsement of the claim that the contents of perception are nonconceptual in this sense (485-6), as are Peacocke (1992a) and Martin (1992). The case of Evans is a bit less clear; but passages in Evans 1982 indicate that he supports the absolute nonconceptual content thesis, such as “the process of conceptualization or judgement takes the subject from one kind of state (with a content of a certain kind, namely nonconceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content)” (227). And it seems clear that the thesis that perceptual content is absolutely nonconceptual is at least part of what McDowell (1994) takes himself to be arguing against.

³Every author who defends nonconceptual content appears to hold the view that the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual, in this sense.

“Could experiences be conceptual states in this way: the appearances of things being restricted by one’s conceptual capacities?”

And says that he will argue that

“... perceptual experiences have a richer phenomenological character than one’s conceptual resources need allow.”

In these last two quotes, it seems clear that the issue of relative conceptual content is what Martin has in mind. And Martin is not alone in running these two issues together.

One might think that, if these two theses are often run together, there must be some close logical relationship between them: either that they are necessarily equivalent, or that one entails the other. But this is far from obvious. Nothing seems to block the possibility that the same kinds of contents might be the objects of both perception and belief (the negation of the absolute nonconceptualist thesis), but that in order for an agent to have a perceptual experience with content p , the agent need not satisfy the conditions for grasping or possessing p (the relative nonconceptualist thesis).⁴ And at this point, I suggest, we have too few constraints on the notion of concept possession to rule out the converse — that one must grasp (possess) the contents of perception and thought, but that the two are different sorts of contents.

So one source of unclarity in the debate over nonconceptual content stems from conflation of the apparently independent issues of absolute and relative nonconceptual content. The idea that the nonconceptualist’s thesis admits of two different interpretations, corresponding roughly to the above distinction between absolute and relative nonconceptual content, is not new.⁵ But the importance of the distinction has not been fully appreciated.

As the preceding discussion should make clear, there are two further sources of confusion, one attached to each of the two senses of ‘nonconceptual content’ defined above. In the case of absolute nonconceptual content, we appealed to the idea of two different mental state types having different *kinds of content*; but very little is usually said about what these different kinds might be, or even about what it might mean for there to be several different kinds of content.⁶ The case of relative nonconceptual content is no better off; there we appealed to the notion of an agent’s *grasping* or *possessing* a content. As will become clear, the use to which this notion is usually put presupposes a contentious — and, I shall argue, false — view of the nature of thought.

One of the theses I will defend is that once we are clear about the distinction between the two senses in which the content of perception might be nonconceptual, and about what different kinds of content and grasp of a content might be, the question of whether the contents of perception are nonconceptual will look quite a bit different. In particular, some of the arguments given on either side of the debate will appear irrelevant to either of the issues at hand, and others will be relevant to one, even though usually stated in terms of the other. My main aim is clarificatory, and not the presentation of new arguments on either side of the debate. But this is partly because I think that, once ambiguity and some false presuppositions are cleared away, a clearer view of the relationship between perception and thought emerges.

⁴Heck (2000) suspects that this possibility is “indefensible — even incoherent”, but does not argue the point (486, note 6). It is hard to see how one could argue the point, short of giving an argument that the idea that the contents of experiences are not absolutely nonconceptual is itself indefensible or incoherent.

⁵See Heck 2000 and Byrne 2005. Heck’s ‘state nonconceptualism’ corresponds roughly to what I call ‘relative nonconceptual content.’

⁶An exception is the work of Christopher Peacocke in developing a notion of scenario content. See, for example, Peacocke 1992a.

2 The case for nonconceptual content

Most of the action in the debate over nonconceptual content has centered on a series of arguments in favor of the thesis that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual. Because these arguments are usually discussed without aid of the distinction between absolute and relative nonconceptual content, it will be useful to first present the arguments, and then to evaluate them with respect to each disambiguation of the nonconceptualist thesis.

So far as I can see, there are seven such arguments, which fit naturally into two different categories. Arguments in the first category begin by noting some feature or aspect of perception, and argue from the existence of this or that feature that the contents of perception are nonconceptual; arguments in the second category begin with a general thesis about the conceptual, and go on to argue that the contents of perception do not conform to this general thesis, and hence are nonconceptual.

ARGUMENTS FROM FEATURES OF PERCEPTION

- [1] The contents of perceptions are more rich/detailed/fine-grained than the conceptual contents of thoughts and beliefs.
- [2] The perceptions of at least some non-human animals are nonconceptual. But, since human beings and (at least some) non-human animals are capable of the same kinds of perceptual awareness of the world, human perception is nonconceptual as well.
- [3] The contents of perceptions are situation-dependent in a way that conceptual contents cannot be.
- [4] The way in which perception provides information to memory shows that perceptual content is nonconceptual.

ARGUMENTS FROM GENERAL THESES ABOUT THE CONCEPTUAL

- [5] But should be able to explain how we come to possess particular concepts; but we can only explain our acquisition of demonstrative concepts by supposing that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual.
- [6] Conceptual thought requires the ability to conceive of contents as objective. Because having perceptions with objective content does not require this, the contents of perception are nonconceptual.
- [7] Conceptual contents, such as the contents of beliefs and thoughts, are individuated by Frege's criterion of difference for senses; but the contents of perceptions are not individuated by Frege's criterion.

Most attention has been focused on these seven arguments.⁷ Opponents of nonconceptual

⁷For defense of argument [1], see Evans 1982; Heck 2000; Kelly 2001a; on argument [2], see Evans 1982; Peacocke 2001a; on argument [3], see Kelly 2001b; on argument [4], see Martin 1992; on argument [5], see Heck 2000; on argument [6], see Peacocke 2001a,b; on argument [7], see Peacocke 1989; Crane 1988.

I omit discussion of one prominent argument, mainly because, in my view, it is not best construed as an argument for nonconceptualism at all. In *Mind & World*, John McDowell selected several arguments from Gareth Evans' *Varieties of Reference* to which he responded in defense of his conceptualist view of experience; one of these was Evans' argument that perception is independent of belief, in the sense that an agent might be in a perceptual state which represents the world as being thus and so without being at

content have, however, put forward a few positive arguments of their own. Each of these concludes that explaining some feature of our mental lives requires the thesis that the contents of experience are conceptual. Proponents of the thesis that the contents of experience are conceptual have emphasized the need to account for our ability to have thoughts about an external world, for our ability to have justified beliefs about an external world, and for the fact that perceptions can give us reasons for belief. I will return to these arguments below.

3 Absolute nonconceptual content

I first want to discuss the relevance of these seven nonconceptualist arguments to the issue of absolute nonconceptual content. I shall argue that, somewhat surprisingly, only one of the seven arguments in favor of nonconceptual content listed is even relevant to the question of whether the contents of perceptions are absolutely nonconceptual; and, I shall argue, this one is not very convincing.

3.1 *What would it mean for perceptions to have different kinds of contents than thoughts and beliefs?*

Before considering these arguments, though, it will help to fix ideas by getting a better idea of what might be meant by the notion of one kind of state's having a different kind of content than another, which above we used to explain the idea of perception's having absolute nonconceptual content.

One way for perceptions to have different kinds of contents than conceptual states like belief and thought would be for the contents of both perceptions and thoughts to be propositions, but for the kind of proposition to differ between the two cases. One way for this to be so would be for the contents of thoughts and beliefs to have a kind of structure that the contents of perceptions lack.⁸ On this view, then,

- (i) The contents of beliefs and thoughts are structured propositions, whereas the contents of perceptions are unstructured propositions, for example sets of possible worlds or sets of circumstances.

But the difference between the propositions which are the contents of thoughts and those which are the contents of perceptions might not consist in the former being structured; it might be the case that each is structured, but that the elements of the structured propositions differ between the two cases. So, for example, it might turn out that

all inclined to believe that the world is thus and so (Evans 1982, 123-4). But, as McDowell has noted, this only counts against the view that perceptual states are simply dispositions to form belief (see McDowell 1994, 60-2; for an example of the view that perceiving that so and so is having a certain kind of disposition to believe that so and so, see Armstrong 1968). Were this view of perception true, it would seem to follow that the contents of perception are conceptual (if the contents of beliefs are); but showing that this view is false does not amount to showing that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual. There is no bar to thinking that perception cannot be analyzed in terms of belief *and* thinking that the contents of the two are the same sort of thing. Most people think that the contents of desires and of beliefs are the same sort of thing; but most people don't think that you can analyze belief in terms of desire, or the other way around, and most people don't think that this shows that there is a special kind of desire content. I think that the best way to read Evans here is not (as McDowell thinks) as proposing an argument in favor of nonconceptual content, but rather as stating an objection to one view of perception which, if true, would entail that beliefs and perceptions have the same kinds of contents (and thus that if the contents of beliefs are conceptual — which Evans grants — then the contents of perceptions must be conceptual as well).

⁸This is suggested in Heck 2000, 485-6.

- (ii) The contents of beliefs and perceptions are both structured propositions, but the contents of beliefs have as their constituents Fregean senses — ways of thinking about objects and properties — whereas the contents of perceptions are Russellian propositions, which have as their constituents the objects and properties themselves.

(ii) is a natural construal of the thought, often voiced by proponents of nonconceptual content, that thought involves transforming experience by *conceptualizing* it — according to (ii), this process of conceptualizing could be thought of as subsumption of the objects and properties presented by experience under a concept, or Fregean sense.

There is one more way of making sense of absolute nonconceptual content. According to it, the contents of perceptions differ from the contents of thoughts in that the former are not really propositions at all, but a different kind of content altogether. Christopher Peacocke, for example, has suggested that the content of a perceptual state is a *scenario*, thought of roughly as a set of ways of filling out the space around a perceiver.⁹ On this final alternative, then,

- (iii) The contents of thoughts are propositions, whereas the contents of perceptions are not.

Evaluation of the arguments for absolute nonconceptualism can then take the form of the question: do any of these arguments show that any of (i)-(iii) is correct?

3.2 Arguments for the absolute nonconceptual content of experience

The first four arguments listed above all begin by noting some aspect of perceptual experience, and argue that this aspect of experience shows its content to be nonconceptual. But quick examination shows that none of these four arguments have much at all to do with the thesis that the contents of perceptions are absolutely nonconceptual, in any of ways (i)-(iii).

The arguments from features of perception

1. Much of the discussion in the literature has focused on the question of whether the fine-grained character of experience shows that the contents of experience are nonconceptual. The intuition behind the appeal to the richness of experience is well stated by Richard Heck: “Consider your current perceptual state — and now imagine what a complete description of the way the world appears to you at this moment might be like. Surely a thousand words would hardly begin to do the job.”¹⁰ Suppose that this is right; suppose that the contents of an experience or perceptual state are far more detailed and full of information than could be captured in a single thought, or even in a lifetime of thoughts. On the face of it, this hardly shows that the information given in perception is of a different *kind* than the information about the world represented in a belief; it shows, at most, that there’s more of it in the case of perception.

Suppose, for example, that the contents of beliefs are Russellian propositions, whose constituents are objects and properties. It is very plausible that, if we think of the content of a given perceptual experience as a Russellian proposition, it will be a very complicated proposition indeed, which represents many objects as having a great many properties. But there is nothing implausible in the thought that the contents of perceptions are very

⁹See, among other places, Peacocke 1992a.

¹⁰Heck 2000, 487.

complex. It is presumably uncontroversial that a normal visual experience has very many aspects, and represents one's environment as instantiating many diverse properties – but isn't to say this just to say that the contents of perceptual experiences are very complex? If there is nothing to rule out this thought, then there is nothing in the richness of experience to rule out the thought that the contents of perceptions are the same kinds of things as the contents of beliefs and other mental states; so the richness of experience is not relevant to the question of whether the contents of perceptions are absolutely nonconceptual.¹¹

2. One of Evans' original arguments for the nonconceptual character of perceptual content was based on a continuity in the contents of perceptions between human beings and at least some animals. Christopher Peacocke puts the idea behind the argument well:

“While being reluctant to attribute concepts to the lower animals, many of us would also want to insist that the property of (say) representing a flat brown surface as being at a certain distance from one can be common to the perceptions of humans and of lower animals. . . . If the lower animals do not have states with conceptual content, but some of their states have contents in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual.”¹²

It seems to me that this argument, while intuitively appealing, contains a *non sequitur*. Suppose we grant — though we will find reason to doubt this later — that animals do not possess concepts, and that our perceptions may share representational properties with the perceptions of animals. It does not follow from these two claims that there is a special kind of content, (absolute) nonconceptual content, which the perceptions of lower animals (and, by the concluding argument, those of human beings as well) have. From the fact that animals have perceptions with content and the fact that they possess no concepts, it only follows that the perceptions of animals have content which is nonconceptual in the *relative* sense. So, even granting Peacocke's basic premises, this cannot be construed as an argument for the claim that the contents of perceptions are absolutely nonconceptual. Rather, I suggest, like [1] it should be construed as an argument for the thesis that the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual. At base, the question here is one about concept possession, and not about different kinds of content.

3. Sean Kelly has argued that the situation-dependence of perceptual content shows that it is nonconceptual; as he puts it, “Concepts, even demonstrative ones, pick out situation independent features, but the perceptual experience of a property is always dependent upon . . . two aspects of the situation — context and object.”¹³ The dependence in question is of course not that *having* this sort of perceptual experience depends upon there being objects of a certain sort and a setting for the experience; for, since having certain beliefs plausibly depends upon there being objects of a certain sort and a certain context in which the belief is acquired, this dependence would not be a point of contrast between perception and belief. The relevant kind of situation dependence is a dependence of elements of the content of the perception, not a dependence of the having of the perception. But in what sense are (some of) the contents of perception situation dependent? Kelly gives two different senses: (i) Some properties perceived in experience, such as colors, are perceived in different ways — yielding a difference in the contents of perception —

¹¹It seems as though at least some of the theorists who have debated either side of this argument do take it to be relevant only to the issue of relative nonconceptual content. The discussion in Kelly 2001a, for example, focuses on possession conditions for demonstrative concepts; and this is surely only relevant to the relations between the contents of perceptions and the agent doing the perceiving.

¹²Peacocke 2001b, 614.

¹³Kelly 2001b, 608.

depending on the setting in which they are perceived, such as the lighting conditions. (ii) Some properties perceived in experience — color is again an example — are such that they are perceived differently — again yielding a difference in the content of the experience — depending on the object perceived as instantiating them.¹⁴ There is more to be said here about what these kinds of situation-dependence amount to; but the foregoing is enough to show that this argument is better discussed under the heading of relative nonconceptual content. Kelly’s examples do seem to indicate that the properties perceived in experience sometimes include properties like *being well lit* or *being a property of a wool rug*; but for this to be an argument that the contents of experience are absolutely nonconceptual we would need the further claims that such properties cannot figure in thought, and that these properties are somehow different in kind from the properties that can figure in the conceptual contents of thought. But there seems to be no reason to endorse either of these claims, and Kelly does not seem to argue for either. This indicates that it was his intention to argue that the contents of perception are nonconceptual in the relative rather than the absolute sense.¹⁵

4. The last of the arguments from features of perception turns on the connections between perception and memory. Michael Martin, in “Perception, Concepts, and Memory,” gave a plausible description of a case in which an agent, Mary, is playing a game with dice, one of which is 8-sided and one of which is 12-sided. But Mary does not distinguish between the two dice; she treats all dice with more than six sides as the same. Martin claims that, when playing with the dice, Mary may well lack the concept of a dodecahedron; and this seems plausible. But, he says, Mary might later, after acquiring the concept of a dodecahedron, recall her experience playing the game, and realize that one of the dice was a dodecahedron. This, Martin says, indicates that Mary’s original experience presented the die as a dodecahedron; but, if Mary did not possess the concept of a dodecahedron, this must mean that the content of her experience was nonconceptual. In this case, it is perfectly clear that Martin has in mind relative nonconceptual content; his focus is clearly on concept possession, and he makes no attempt to show that the content of Mary’s perceptual experience must have been of a different kind than the contents of her beliefs or thoughts. So, as in the case of the other arguments from features of perception, we should conclude that this argument is simply irrelevant to the issue about absolute nonconceptual content.

I have claimed that none of the four arguments from features of perception are relevant to the issue about absolute nonconceptual content; more strictly, I have argued that none of them is a good argument for the existence of absolute nonconceptual content without the addition of assumptions which are neither plausibly true nor truly attributable to the authors of the texts under consideration.

The arguments from the nature of the conceptual

¹⁴In discussing this object-dependence of color perception, Kelly also appeals to Frege’s constraint on the individuation of conceptual contents, and argues that the contents of perceptions do not meet this constraint. But this seems to me a separate argument; I discuss it below in the discussion of Peacocke 1989.

¹⁵I have described these dependencies on context and object as properties which figure in the content of the experience; but sometimes Kelly speaks of them, using the language of Fregean sense, as ways in which color properties are perceived. But the same point holds on this reformulation. If these aspects of situation dependence are thought of as senses (or modes of presentation), then we would still need the further claims that these senses cannot figure in thought, and that these senses are different in kind, in some sense or other, from the senses which can figure in thought. But again, I see no reason to endorse either of these claims.

One might expect the arguments from the nature of the conceptual to fare better; after all, these seem to have the right form for a defense of the absolute nonconceptual content thesis. They begin with a necessary condition on the conceptual, and then argue that the contents of perception fail to meet this condition.

5. The first of these was put forward by Richard Heck, who argued that we need to think of the contents of perception as nonconceptual in order to explain our ability to have certain demonstrative thoughts.¹⁶ Heck expresses this argument as follows:

“what *explains* my having these [demonstrative] concepts is my having ... an experience with a certain sort of content. But, if that is right, it is hard to see how these demonstrative concepts could be part of the content of my experience. ... There would not seem to be sufficient distance between my having the experience and my possessing the concept for the former to *explain* the latter. So, if such an explanation were wanted, the content of the experience ... would have to be treated as nonconceptual (in the relevant respects).” (Heck 2000, 492)

But the conclusion of this argument is simply a *non sequitur* if what is being claimed is that the contents of experience are absolutely nonconceptual. The thought is presumably that if my perception were already conceptual, then it could not explain my coming to grasp the relevant demonstrative concept. But consider the following reformulation of this thought, disambiguating ‘nonconceptual’ to mean ‘absolutely nonconceptual’: if my perception had the same kind of content as do my thoughts and beliefs, then having a perception with a certain content could not explain my coming to have the ability to have beliefs and thoughts involving that content. There seems no reason at all to accept this; if anything, our ability to have thoughts on the basis of our perceptions would be *easier* to understand if they had the same kinds of contents. So if this sort of argument is to work in favor of the thesis that perceptions have nonconceptual content it must, contra Heck, be considered an argument in favor of relative, rather than absolute, nonconceptual content.¹⁷

¹⁶Heck 2000, §3. In general, such arguments will have limited bite against the position of conceptualists like McDowell, who generally take questions such as how we are able to have certain kinds of thoughts as pseudo-questions. I don’t discuss this quietist line of response to the nonconceptualist challenge here. For a statement of McDowell’s quietism in response to this sort of demand for explanation, see Part II of the Afterword to *Mind & World*, §2.

¹⁷Later in the paper (494-6), Heck puts forward a structurally similar argument, according to which what the opponent of nonconceptual content cannot explain is the *reference* of certain demonstrative concepts. This second argument begins with the plausible observation that I can have demonstrative thoughts, not only about the properties in my environment, but also (as in the case of nonveridical perception) about the properties my experience represents objects as having. Heck’s challenge is then to explain how the reference of demonstrative concepts referring to features of one’s experience is fixed. Heck’s argument is that the challenge can only be answered by making use of nonconceptual content, since “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” (Heck 2000, 496). (Passages earlier on the page indicate that ‘fix the content’ here should be read as ‘fix the reference.’ Thanks to an anonymous reader for pointing this out.)

I think that Heck’s line of thought here is as follows: (i) every Fregean who recognizes a distinction between sense and reference for demonstrative expressions owes some account of how the reference of a given demonstrative concept (sense) is determined; (ii) in particular, such a Fregean owes an account of how the reference of a demonstrative concept which refers to the color property my experience represents some object as having has its reference fixed; (iii) the natural way to explain the reference of such a demonstrative concept is to say that it refers to the color property which figures in the content of the perception; but (iv) taking this route commits the Fregean to absolute nonconceptual content, since the above story about reference determination implies that the contents of thoughts are different sorts of

6. Peacocke has, however, defended a very different sort of argument in favor of non-conceptual content, based on a link between the conceptual contents of thought and the concept of objectivity. In “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?”, he concludes,

“I conjecture that this distinction, in point of grasp of objectivity, between the minimal requirements for having states with nonconceptual contents, and what is involved in nonconceptual content, is a deeper reason why perceptual content cannot be explained in terms of conceptual content. The most primitive aspects of representational content in perception, which our subjective experience shares with mere animals, do not involve the grasp of objectivity required for conceptual content. This is one of the reasons that trying to treat all perceptual content as conceptual involves an overascription. We should always distinguish between content which is objective, and content which is not only objective, but is also conceived of as objective.” (264)

I take it that Peacocke’s final point should be granted: there is a distinction between content which is objective, in the sense of being about an objective world, and content which represents some content as objectively true. But how does this bear on the issue of nonconceptual content?¹⁸ Again, I think we should say that this argument is basically irrelevant to the issue about absolute nonconceptual content. Even if it is true that in bearing some kind of conceptual attitude toward a content a thinker must conceive of that content as objective, this does not show that the content to which the attitude is borne must be different in kind from the contents presented in perception. (Recall the options canvassed above. Could the fact that thinking a certain content involves conceiving of that content as objective show, for example, that the contents of thoughts are Fregean propositions, whereas the contents of perceptions are nonpropositional? It’s hard to see how.) Indeed, the fact that this point seems to turn on possession and application of a certain kind of concept — the concept of objectivity — it seems clear that the natural home for this objection is the discussion of relative nonconceptual content.

7. So far we have canvassed six of the leading arguments for the nonconceptual content of perception, and have found that they are all irrelevant to the issue of absolute nonconceptual content. A final argument, I think, comes closer to the mark: the argument that the constituents of thoughts are individuated by Frege’s criterion, whereas the constituents

things than the contents of perceptions: the former include things like demonstrative concepts, while the latter include the references of those demonstrative concepts (for example, color properties).

One obvious response to this argument is to follow the anti-Fregean in denying that there is any distinction between the color property to which such a demonstrative expression refers and the sense of that expression. But I think that the Fregean opponent of nonconceptual content also has a ready reply. Any proponent of a Fregean view of the contents of perceptual experience should have some story about how the Fregean senses which figure in the contents of experience connect to the properties in the world which those experiences represent objects as having. Certainly, Heck has given us no reason to believe that no such story can be told. But, if there is such a story, this is already enough to reply to Heck’s argument: the Fregean should just say that, in cases in which the same demonstrative concept is part of the content of an experience and of a thought had on the basis of that experience, the reference of the demonstrative concept in the thought is inherited from the reference of the demonstrative concept figuring in the perception. This does not involve commitment to the contents of thoughts and perceptions being different sorts of things; it only involves commitment to there being some account of the relationship between the contents of experience and the objects and properties those experiences represent.

¹⁸One way in which it is relevant is as a response to McDowell’s claim that perceptual content must be conceptual in order to explain how it is possible for us to have thoughts with objective content at all; but here I am discussing how this distinction provides a positive argument for the thesis that perceptual content is nonconceptual, as Peacocke seems to think that it does.

of the contents of perceptions are not. This does seem, on the face of it, to be an argument about the nature of the contents of perception, and not about the relations between agents and those contents.

On one formulation, Frege's Criterion, as applied to sentences, has it that

Two sentences S and S' have different senses iff it is possible for someone who understands both to take one to be true and the other false (or, in general, to take different attitudes toward the sentences)¹⁹

For our purposes, though, we need a different formulation of the criterion. The above formulation gives us a criterion for difference of senses of linguistic items; but we are interested in the contents of perception rather than of sentences and words, and it is at least controversial that there is anything in the perceptual case which is the bearer of a sense in quite the same way as sentences of words are bearers of senses.

So, ideally, we want a criterion for difference of senses stated just in terms of senses, and not in terms of the words they are senses of. We can restrict attention to two kinds of senses, which I shall call object-senses and property-senses. The former are ways of thinking about objects, and are the kinds of things which are the senses of singular terms, whereas the latter are ways of thinking about properties, and are the kinds of things which are the senses of predicates. For either sort of sense, we can say that

F and G are distinct if someone can grasp both and yet judge that $F \neq G$

So, for example, the senses of "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" are judged to be distinct, since someone who understood both terms could yet judge that Hesperus is not Phosphorus. We can also formulate a second, and related version of the criterion which applies to property senses alone:

F and G are distinct if someone can grasp both and yet judge of some object x that x is F and $\neg G$

Each of these two versions of Frege's Criterion has been used in a prominent argument in favor of the content of experience being nonconceptual.

The first formulation is used in an argument of Peacocke, which may be restated as follows: (i) The conceptual contents of thoughts are Fregean senses, individuated by Frege's criterion. (ii) Suppose (for reductio) that the contents of experiences are also conceptual, in this sense. (iii) Now imagine an experience of a line and a bar in a wallpaper pattern, such that the length of the line is presented in just the same way as the length of the bar. (iv) Given (ii) and (iii), we should say that this visual experience contains two identical property-senses. (v) A subject having this experience grasps both of the senses. (vi) And yet such a subject might be unsure about whether the length of the bar really is the same as the length of the line. (vii) But (iv)-(vi) jointly contradict the first formulation of Frege's Criterion; so the contents of experiences are not Fregean senses, and so are a different kind of thing than the contents of thoughts.

The second argument from Frege's criterion begins by generalizing the second formulation above to say that senses F, G are distinct if someone can grasp both and yet have

¹⁹See Evans 1982, 18-19. It is plausible that this principle should include some sort of minimal rationality requirement; I ignore this here, since none of the examples discussed involve agents who would fail to meet such a requirement.

an experience of some object as F and $\neg G$.²⁰ But Tim Crane has argued that the Waterfall Illusion — in which a subject focuses her attention for a period of time on an object moving in one direction, and then switches her attention to a stationary object — is an example of an experience in which a subject can perceive a single object as both moving and not moving.²¹ But moving and moving are not distinct senses; so the contents of experience must not conform to this expanded version of Frege's Criterion, and so must not be Fregean senses.

Unlike the previous seven arguments we have examined, this one does seem to be a genuine argument for absolute nonconceptual content. How should we respond to these two arguments? There are, I think, two ways to go.

The first way is to accept Frege's Criterion, but hold that these kinds of examples are consistent with the claim that the contents of perceptions are individuated by it. One could then respond to the two arguments as follows:

Peacocke does not describe a coherent situation. If the subject can doubt whether the line and the bar are really the same length, then the lengths of the line and bar must not be presented in exactly the same way in the subject's experience. We can, after all, always find ways to distinguish the ways in which two instantiations of a property are presented in experience. In this case, it seems very plausible that part of the way in which length properties are presented to us in perception involves some sort of presentation of distance, and some sort of comparison to the lengths of adjacent objects. (The line in the wallpaper pattern is presented as longer than the line next to it, as about the same length as the box on the table just beneath it, etc.) This will give us the materials to distinguish in the relevant kinds of cases between the way that the length of one object is presented, and the way that the length of another object is presented.

Crane's argument goes wrong by generalizing Frege's Criterion from cognitive attitudes like judgement or belief to the propositional attitudes associated with perception. Rejecting this generalization allows us to preserve both the idea that the contents of thought conform to Frege's Criterion, and the idea that the contents of perception are the same as the contents of thought, while allowing for the possibility that one object may be perceived as having contradictory properties at a time. To get a genuine conflict with the Criterion, we would need a case in which the agent *judges* that the object has contradictory properties; but in the Waterfall Illusion, agents do not judge that some object is both moving and not moving. (Compare the case of a minimally rational agent having contradictory desires; this kind of case would not typically be taken to show that desires have a special sort of content, not individuated by Frege's Criterion.)²²

Both of these seem to me to be satisfactory responses on the part of the opponent of absolute nonconceptual content.

But a quite different response is also available, and this is to note that Frege's Criterion fails for thoughts and beliefs in just the way that Peacocke and Crane argue that it fails

²⁰The generalization is from a claim about the relationship between judgement and distinctness of senses to a claim about the relationship between judgement *or perception* and distinctness of senses.

²¹Crane 1988.

²²Thanks to an anonymous reader for the *Philosophical Review* for helpful discussion of this point.

for perception. To show this, the only premise needed is that there can be synonyms in public languages, like English.²³ If there are synonyms, then presumably “catsup” and “ketchup” are an example. But it is not difficult to imagine cases in which some agent satisfies the conditions for understanding each word, but does not know that the two are synonyms. In such a situation, the agent may well wonder whether catsup is ketchup (just as the agent in Peacocke’s example wonders whether the length of the bar is the length of the line), and might well judge that something is catsup but not ketchup (which, if the two are synonyms, is just like an agent judging in the context of the Waterfall Illusion that some object is both moving and not moving). Since the phenomena seem so similar, it does not appear to be very likely that the arguments of Peacocke and Crane show anything special about the nature of the contents of perception. Rather, their examples are picking up on ways in which Frege’s Criterion can fail for the contents of thought and the contents of perception.

To sum up: the one argument relevant to the issue of absolute nonconceptual content is not a very convincing one. More striking than the failure of this argument, though, is that six of the seven arguments we’ve considered do not even seem to be directed at the claim that the contents of experience are absolutely nonconceptual. To this extent, the claims made by proponents of nonconceptual content about the contents of experience being a special kind of content must be regarded as a mistake.

3.3 McDowell’s conceptualist alternative

So much for arguments for the claim that the contents of experience are absolutely non-conceptual. Do any of the arguments against this claim fare any better? I mentioned above that arguments against absolute nonconceptual content typically begin with some fact about our cognitive lives, and argue that our perceptions having conceptual content is a necessary precondition for this fact to obtain. Sometimes the fact is our ability to have thoughts about an objective world, and other times it is the fact that perceptual experiences can give us reasons for belief. Here I shall focus on the argument from the fact that perceptions can give us reasons for belief to the conclusion that the contents of experiences must be conceptual.²⁴

A bare-bones outline of this argument has the following form:

²³The example which follows is due to Salmon 1990. There is an interesting parallel here with Peacocke’s argument for nonconceptual content. Above I noted that you could respond to the argument by denying that the lengths of the bar and the line were presented in just the same way. Peacocke might then respond that he can run an argument of his sort if it is ever the case that two distinct instances of a property *are* presented in the same way. Just so, we can run an argument against Frege’s Criterion as applied to thought if it is ever the case that two distinct words present a property (or object) in just the same way (in other words, if synonyms are possible).

²⁴I take the challenge to explain how perceptions can give us reasons for belief to be equivalent, in this context, to the challenge to explain how perceptions can justify belief.

In the Introduction to *Mind & World*, McDowell claims that the question of how we can have thoughts about an objective world is more fundamental than the question of how we can have knowledge, or justified belief, about such a world (McDowell 1994, xiii). So, to the extent that I focus on the latter question, I think that I must be distorting McDowell’s intentions. I focus on questions of justification, or reasons for belief, only because there is a fairly clear argument which purports to show that conceptual contents of perception are necessary for perceptions to provide these sorts of reasons. Despite McDowell’s clear emphasis on the importance of the question of the possibility of thought about an external world, I have not been able to isolate any argument in the text which uses this claim in an argument that experiences have conceptual content.

- (1) Perceptions provide agents with reasons for forming certain beliefs.
 - (2) If perceptions provide agents with reasons for forming beliefs, the contents of those perceptions must be conceptual.
-
- (C) The contents of perceptions must be conceptual. (1,2)

The argument is valid, and I take it that premise (1) is not up for debate; so a defense of the argument must focus on (2).

A characteristic statement of McDowell's reason for holding (2) is

“If these relations [between perceptual contents and the beliefs perceptions give us reason to form] are to be genuinely recognizable as reason-constituting, we cannot confine spontaneity within a boundary across which the relations are supposed to hold. The relations themselves must be able to come under the self-scrutiny of active thinking.”²⁵

The thought here seems to be that if a perception provides a reason for *A* to believe *p*, *A* must be able to ‘scrutinize’ the relationship between this perception and *p* — that is, at the least, *A* must be able to think about the relation between the two. This is supposed to count in favor of (2) because part of *A*'s thinking about this relation is her thinking about the relata: the content of the perception and the content of the belief to be formed. But if the content of the perception is part of the content of *A*'s thought, then the content of that perception cannot be absolutely nonconceptual; if the content of the perception is also a content of *A*'s thought, then the content of the perception cannot be a different sort of thing than the contents of thought.

I think that McDowell's claim that reasons must be open to scrutiny in this way is an appealing one; but I do not think that it shows that the contents of experience must be absolutely conceptual. The key move in McDowell's reasoning is the move from the claim that

The subject must be able to think about the relation between the content of her perception and the content of a belief

to

The content of the subject's belief must be a part of the content of her thought about the relation between her perception and the content of a belief

We can grant McDowell that thinking about the relation between the content of a perception and the content of a belief involves thinking about the content of the perception; but, in general, having a thought about *x* does not imply that *x* is part of the content of one's thought. We can, after all, think about objects more or less indirectly. There is a sense in which the thought that I would express by saying “The shortest spy in the world is French” is about that individual, whoever he or she is, that is the shortest spy in the world; but that individual is not a part of the content of my thought.

So, to defend (2), McDowell needs some argument for the claim that my thought about the content of the perception must be directly referential rather than, for example, a thought about that content under a description. It is important to note that this is more than a technical difficulty for McDowell. Proponents of the view that perceptual content is absolutely nonconceptual typically think that coming to have thoughts on the

²⁵McDowell 1994.

basis of a perception involves *conceptualizing* the content of that perception. This way of thinking about the deliverances of perception looks to be similar to thinking of an object under a description, as in the case of the shortest spy; and this is a way of thinking about a perceptual content without that perceptual content itself figuring in the content of the thought.²⁶

To be sure, the issues surrounding McDowell's view of reasons for belief are subtle and complicated, and this brief discussion does not pretend to be comprehensive. The point of this discussion is only to point out one apparently coherent way in which the proponent of nonconceptual content can resist the force of McDowell-style arguments.

3.4 What we should say about absolute nonconceptual content

So should we say that the contents of experiences are the same sorts of things as, or different sorts of things than, the contents of judgements and beliefs? None of the arguments we have considered push us much in one direction or the other. Nonetheless, absent further arguments, it seems to me reasonable to think that the contents of experiences are the same sorts of things as the contents of judgements and beliefs.

There are a number of less than conclusive reasons for this. First, it seems a simpler model of our access to the world; even if there is no convincing McDowell-style argument

²⁶This kind of counter to McDowell's position is similar to one which has been defended by Christopher Peacocke. (See, for example, Peacocke 1992b and, more recently, Peacocke 2001b, §IV.) In a response to Peacocke in Part II of the Afterword to *Mind & World*, McDowell presses an objection to this view. He writes, "[Peacocke] 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 that the subject can give, insofar as they are articulable, must be within the space of concepts" (165). This is best regarded as a separate argument designed to rebut the above response. It runs as follows: (1) The contents of perceptions can be reasons for belief. (2) If something is a reason for a subject, that subject must be able to state that reason. (3) Therefore, subjects must be able to state the contents of their perceptions (which give them reasons). (4) If a content is statable it is also thinkable, and hence conceptual. (5) Therefore the contents of perceptions must be conceptual. Again, the argument is valid; but here I think that a nonconceptualist should just respond by denying (2). Though even this seems excessively strong, the nonconceptualist can admit that if something is a reason for a subject, the subject can talk about it; the nonconceptualist need only deny that if some proposition or content is a reason for a subject to do something, that subject must be able to utter some sentence which has that content as its meaning. I do not think that many nonconceptualists would balk at this move. See, for example, Heck 2000.

The above distinction between thinking about x and x being a part of the content of one's thought is also relevant to an argument against absolute nonconceptual content which, though rarely stated explicitly, does represent a kind of pervasive thought among philosophers hostile to the idea of nonconceptual content. This argument is simply that the contents of perceptions are trivially conceptual, since we can think about the contents of our perceptions, and the objects of thought are, by definition, conceptual contents. There may be something to this line of thought; but it is not quite that easy. The proponent of absolute nonconceptual content will not, as we saw above, deny that we can have thoughts *about* nonconceptual content; she will rather deny that we can have thoughts whose content *is* nonconceptual. To make this point is just to employ the distinction between the contents which figure in our thoughts, and the referents of those contents. If I think that the shortest spy in the world is French, then the property of being the shortest spy is part of the content of my thought; but the individual to whom this definite description refers is not part of that content, but only what that content designates. Just so, the proponent of absolute nonconceptual content should say, our ability to have thoughts about the (nonconceptual parts of) the contents of our perceptions is only the ability to have thoughts which have those contents as referents, much as we can have thoughts about the individual who happens to be the shortest spy without his being a part of the content of our thought. (A reply to this objection by the conceptualist might be to defend a direct reference theory of the semantics of demonstratives, and to claim that we can use demonstratives such as "that content" (while "internally demonstrating" the content of our perception) in order to have thoughts of which the content is a component. But it is perhaps no accident that proponents of nonconceptual content like Evans give a Fregean rather than a direct reference semantics for demonstratives (see, for example, Evans 1981). Were a Fregean semantics for demonstratives correct, this would be enough to block the suggested conceptualist reply.)

from our being justified in empirical beliefs to the conceptual content of experience, it is certainly true that McDowell's model is a simpler one than that of the proponent of absolute nonconceptual content, who must define some sort of relation between the objects of perceptual experience and of belief to explain how the former can justify the latter. Second, there is a common sort of experience of taking one's experience at face value. Roughly, this amounts to believing that the world is the way that your experience presents it as being; the simplest account of this kind of taking things at face value identifies (part of) the content of the perception taken at face value with the belief thereby formed.

A third reason for rejecting absolute nonconceptual content stems from a wish to maintain a certain picture of the relationship between the contents of thoughts, perceptions, and sentences, and the world. This is the view expressed by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* when he wrote,

“When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we — and our meaning — do not stop anywhere short of the fact.” (§95)

About this passage, McDowell writes

“We can formulate the point in a style Wittgenstein would have been uncomfortable with: there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case.”²⁷

If one is attracted to this kind of view, on which the contents of thoughts, sentences and perceptions all belong to the same metaphysical category as do facts — perhaps complexes consisting of individuals and properties — then it is natural to identify these contents with Russellian propositions. In this case, the contents of perceptions end up being the same sorts of things as the contents of thoughts and sentences.²⁸

Suppose that all this is right and that, absent further arguments, it provides good reason to think that the contents of beliefs are the same sorts of things as the contents of perceptions. One might object that this still leaves our opening question open: do both kinds of states have *conceptual* content, or do both kinds of states have *nonconceptual* content? I suggest that we have been given no reason to regard this as anything other than an empty terminological question. Different theorists attach different connotations to the word “conceptual”; but it has no clear theoretical use as a description of kinds of content.

4 Relative nonconceptual content

We can now turn to the question about relative nonconceptual content. But, as was the case with absolute nonconceptual content, the definition of relative nonconceptual content makes use of a notion which itself requires clarification: the idea of possessing, or grasping, a concept or content.

²⁷McDowell 1994, 27.

²⁸This view of contents is of a piece with the skepticism about Frege's Criterion expressed above.

From an anti-Kantian perspective, McDowell's point here sits less well with his Fregean view of content than with a Russellian view. From this perspective (which is of course not McDowell's), it is strange to think of facts as being Fregean propositions, whose constituents are not objects and properties, but ways of thinking about objects and properties.

4.1 What is a theory of concept possession?

There are many different theories of concept possession in the field; rather than discuss these theories, I want to focus on a prior question: What are these theories theories *of*?

Often, to say that someone possesses a concept or grasps a proposition is just to say that she is capable of having, or in a position to have, thoughts or beliefs involving the concept or proposition. I shall call this the *thought-based* understanding of concept possession, since theories of concept possession must, on this view, be answerable to facts about the thoughts and beliefs agents are capable of having. To endorse the thought-based view of concept possession is not really to give a theory of what it is to possess a concept; rather, it indicates what project one is engaged in when one is trying to give such a theory, by making clear the facts which the theory is supposed to capture.

Were contemporary theories of concept possession conducted within a thought-based understanding of the project, then the nature of the project would be clear. But evidently contemporary theorists are engaged in a different sort of project. Some such theorists, for example, are willing to say that deference or the division of linguistic labor shows that language-using agents are able to have thoughts and beliefs involving a certain concept, even though they do not possess the concept; others are willing to acknowledge that non-linguistic animals have beliefs and thoughts, but do so without possessing any concepts. From the perspective of the thought-based approach to theories of concept possession, these claims are contradictory.

Although contemporary theorists are willing to say that an individual can be capable of having thoughts involving a content p without possessing or grasping p , I know of no instances in which it has been claimed that an agent grasps a content p without being able to have thoughts involving it. This indicates that contemporary theories of concept possession are attempts to give an account of the facts in virtue of which some subset of agents are capable of having some subset of the thoughts and beliefs of which they are capable of having. What we want, then, is a characterization of how these subsets are defined.

An initial thought is that the subset in question consists of all those thoughts which are not deference-dependent — which are not, that is, dependent upon the thinker's deferring to other agents in his linguistic community who do possess the concept. There are a number of problems with this proposal. (i) It makes no sense of the claim that non-linguistic animals can have beliefs without possessing concepts, since non-linguistic animals do not have deference-dependent thoughts. (ii) It is circular, since it is partially defined in terms of other agents who do possess the concept. (iii) There are many examples of thoughts which are not characterized as deference-dependent by any extant theory of deference, and yet still are set to the side by theories of concept possession.²⁹

A plausible reply is that the notion of concept possession which is the target of contemporary theories of concept possession has nothing intrinsically to do with deference; rather, it is the idea of a subject having *full mastery* of a concept, as opposed to its merely being true to ascribe propositional attitudes to the subject using a word expressing the concept in the complement of the ascription.³⁰ The exclusion of deference-dependent thoughts was an attempt to capture this notion. One might think, then, that we can define some independent notion of full mastery which solves problems (i)-(iii). But, quite apart from problems with this use of the notion of deference-dependence, there is reason for skepticism about this idea of full mastery of a concept. Consider human subjects, and virtually any concept; there will be a gradation from subjects whose use of the concept is sophisticated

²⁹See especially the examples discussed in Greenberg (ms.).

³⁰Again, see Peacocke 1992b, §1.4.

and frequent to those whose use of the concept is rudimentary, and whose beliefs about the referent of the concept are simple to the point of being nearly nonexistent. There is, *a priori*, no reason to believe that we should be able to draw a principled line in this continuum which gives a satisfying separation between those subjects who have full mastery of the concept and those which do not. But, if we cannot do this, then we will not have sufficient constraints on the theory of concept possession to be constructed.³¹

This is relevant to the present purpose because we are about to consider arguments for and against the claim that the contents of perceptions may include contents not grasped, or possessed, by the perceiver. In each case, the argument will turn on a possession condition for a particular sort of concept. And in each case, I suggest, we should approach the possession condition in question with some measure of skepticism. In particular, we should ask whether the possession condition in question lives up to the constraints set by a thought-based conception of theories of concept possession; and, if it does not, we should ask whether we have any grip on a notion of full mastery of the concept in question which would vindicate the proposed condition.

But there is a more fundamental problem with the appeal to full mastery of concepts in the present context. Even if some reasonably intuitive notion of full mastery were to be elucidated, we should ask how it can play any role in an argument that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual. One might think that the answer is obvious: we could then argue that perceptual content is nonconceptual on the basis of the claim that one can have perceptions whose contents one does not fully master. But this is hardly enough to show that perceptual content is, in anything but the very weakest sense, nonconceptual. After all, it is part of the point of a restrictive notion of full mastery that one can also have *thoughts* and *beliefs* involving contents that one does not fully master. So the proposed form of argument would *not* show a disanalogy between belief and perception, and would show that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual only if it supported the same verdict about the contents of beliefs and thoughts.

4.2 Arguments for the relative nonconceptual content of experience

With these worries in mind, we can again consider the two classes of arguments in favor of nonconceptual content: arguments from features of perception, and arguments from the nature of the conceptual.

Arguments from features of perception

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

A quick, potted history of the debate about this runs as follows: Gareth Evans argued that we do not have as many color concepts as there are shades of color as we can

³¹The point is not that we cannot define some theory-internal notion of full grasp; as Greenberg (ms.) shows, we can do this. The point is that there is no pre-theoretic distinction here to be captured. So, for example, I am not denying that there are pre-theoretically plausible principles, such as Evans' 'Generality Constraint', which link the capacity to have certain kinds of thoughts with certain systematic abilities. It is only to deny that, given the set of agents capable of having thoughts involving some concept *C*, there is any pre-theoretically appealing principle for singling out a subset of those agents as the ones who can not only have thoughts involving *C*, but also have 'full grasp' of *C*.

perceptually discriminate, so that the contents of perceptions must be more fine-grained than the concepts we possess.³² John McDowell replied that Evans had illicitly limited the color concepts under consideration to general color words like “red” and “green”, and noted that we also possess demonstrative concepts of the sort that we might express, while attending to a sample, by phrases like “that shade” or just “that”, while focusing on the color in question.³³ Sean Kelly has replied to McDowell by claiming that we do not possess enough demonstrative concepts to cover all the cases in which we make perceptual discriminations.³⁴

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

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

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

Kelly’s scenario is as follows: a subject is presented several times with a pair of color chips, and each time is able to distinguish the color chips in perception; that is, each time, the subject correctly says that the two color chips are different in color. Now we take one of those color chips, and present it to the subject, asking him whether it is the color chip originally presented on his left. Suppose that we do this ten times, and that the subject answers ‘yes’ five times, and ‘no’ five times. Then the subject has failed the above possession condition for a demonstrative concept referring to the color of the chip originally presented on his left, and then presented ten times by itself: he cannot consistently re-identify the property. But he is clearly able to distinguish the property in experience, as evidenced by his proficiency in distinguishing the two color chips when presented together. Conclusion: the color was part of the content of his experience, but was not the content of any demonstrative concept he possessed.

Part of the reason why Kelly endorses this possession condition for concepts is that it is endorsed by the main proponents of the conceptualist position he is arguing against.³⁵ Nonetheless, it seems to me that the case Kelly describes is a clear *reductio* of the possession condition he defends, rather than a convincing argument against the conceptualist position.

Consider for a moment what is involved in denying that the subject can have demonstrative thoughts about the color of the chip originally presented on his left, and later

³²See Evans 1982, 229.

³³See McDowell 1994, §III.5.

³⁴Kelly 2001a. Christopher Peacocke also criticized McDowell on the grounds that, although we possess such demonstrative concepts, these concepts are *more* fine-grained than our capacities for perceptual discrimination, and hence than our perception of colors must be (relatively) nonconceptual after all (Peacocke 1998). Peacocke gives a plausible reply to his earlier argument in §1 of Peacocke 2001b.

A quite different response to McDowell has been given by Richard Heck, who argues that this appeal to demonstrative concepts deprives McDowell of the possibility of explaining our ability to have demonstrative thoughts. This is argument [5], discussed above (and below).

³⁵Though Kelly does have an independent argument for it; see Kelly 2001a, 405–407. I take the comments on the possession condition below also to count against the example that Kelly uses to motivate the possession condition.

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

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

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

We should conclude, then, that the argument from the fine-grained character of experience, at least as regards color and demonstrative concepts, does not provide a good argument for the relative nonconceptual content of experience.³⁶

2. We can take a similar approach to the argument from the similarity of animal and human perception. It was a premise of that argument that animals do not possess any concepts. On the thought-based conception of theories of concept possession, this should be at least controversial; after all, we often ascribe beliefs to many different sorts of animals. If we are to reject these ascriptions as false, then we need some good reason for this; if we do not reject them as false, then we must admit that non-human animals possess concepts.

But we can respond more directly to this argument, for, even if we grant the premise that animals possess no concepts, the argument that the perceptions of human beings are relatively nonconceptual is invalid. Recall that the argument ran as follows:

³⁶Again, it may be the case that Kelly’s argument fails to show that we cannot have thoughts about the color chip in his imagined scenario, it does show that we fail to fully master the concept of the color of that chip in some theoretically important sense. But then we are owed some explanation of the notion of full mastery which the possession condition is meant to capture, and some sense of why failing full mastery in this sense should be enough to show the contents of perceptions (but not the contents of beliefs) to be nonconceptual.

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

In the discussion of absolute nonconceptual content above, I noted that, if ‘nonconceptual’ means ‘absolutely nonconceptual’, then (2) does not follow from (1). But now we can see that if we interpret ‘nonconceptual’ in this argument to mean ‘relatively nonconceptual’, (C) does not follow from (2) and (3). For, on this disambiguation, the argument from (2) and (3) to (C) would run as follows: non-human animals do not possess the contents of their experiences; the contents of animal experiences are the same kinds of things as the contents of human experiences; therefore humans do not possess the contents of their experiences. But this is not a valid argument, because nothing rules out the possibility that both human beings and animals are related to the same kinds of contents in perception, but that human beings, and not animals, must possess or grasp those contents.

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

3. We saw above that Kelly argued for the nonconceptual content of experience on the basis of the context- and object-dependence of the contents of experience. If this is to be part of an argument for relative nonconceptual content, then there must be some reason to think that human beings cannot, or sometimes do not, possess concepts which are situation-dependent in this way.

As above, we can focus on the application to perception of color of the two kinds of situation-dependence. Kelly claims that we can perceive color differently depending on features of context — such as whether the color is well-illuminated — and depending on what object instantiates the color. This seems right; but we should distinguish two different interpretations of this situation-dependence. On the stronger interpretation, to say that perception of color is dependent on context and object is to say that the content of the experience includes such things as *the blueness of this rug* and *the color white as lit to such and such a degree in this portion of the wall, and to such and such a degree in this other portion of the wall . . .* On the weaker interpretation, to say that color is situation-dependent in these two ways is to say that the contents of our perceptions always include some particular presentation or version of a color, and that what version this is will depend on the object that the color is a color of, and the context (including the lighting context) in which the color is perceived. The key difference is that on the weaker interpretation, features of context go into determining the kind of color experience one has, but these features of context are *not* themselves part of the content of the experience.

An analogy might make the point clearer. Suppose that someone put forward the thesis that our experience of a table is dependent upon the molecular structure of the table. We could interpret this thesis in two ways. On the analogue of the strong interpretation, it might mean that the molecular structure of the table is part of the content of our experience, and our experience depends upon this molecular structure because changes in that structure would be represented as such in our experience. On the analogue of the weak interpretation, the thesis would mean that, although the molecular structure of the table is not part of the content of our experience of the table, sufficient changes in that structure would result in our experience of the table being different.

I do not think that the weaker interpretation provides a good argument for relative

nonconceptual content. For it seems that if the wall is illuminated differently in different places, this difference in one's experience of the wall is the sort of feature of one's experience about which one could reflect in thought, even if one does not have the conceptual capacities to have thoughts about the dependence of perceived color on lighting conditions. The same point holds for object-dependence.

So whether Kelly's argument from situation-dependence is a good one depends upon whether the strong interpretation of situation-dependence is correct. With respect to this question, I think that there is some reason to think that the two kinds of situation-dependence come apart. It is not unreasonable to think that when one's experience of a color depends upon the object perceived as having the color, that the color is represented in one's experience as the color of that object. But in this case it is also not unreasonable to think that the subject in question should be able to judge, or believe, that the color is a color of that object. For that reason, the object-dependence of experience, even under the strong interpretation, does not seem to support the thesis that the contents of experience are relatively nonconceptual.

Partly for this reason, Kelly seems to think that the context-dependence of perceptual content is the stronger part of his argument for nonconceptual content. He writes,

“It is still open to the conceptualist to argue that perceptual content is explicable in terms of the conjunction of a variety of demonstrative concepts — one that picks out the property, one that picks out the object that manifests that property, and then a large set of demonstrative concepts that picks out the relevant features of the context in which the property is being perceived. But it seems as though this last set will present a sticking point, since there could be an indefinitely large number of relevant contextual features, and which features of the context are relevant will change from situation to situation. This seems to me a more likely reason that perceptual content is non-conceptual — because it's situation dependent, and situations aren't specifiable in conceptual terms.”³⁷

This argument presupposes the strong interpretation of the dependence of perceptual content on contexts of perception; the idea is that the aspects of context relevant to determining how a color is perceived are large and differ from context to context, and that it is implausible to think that subjects who perceive color must, in general, possess concepts which pick out each of those features of experience. Both of these premises seem plausible; but we get an argument that the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual only if we add the extra premise from the strong interpretation of context-dependence that those features of context relevant to how a color is perceived *are themselves represented in the experience*. And the very considerations that Kelly brings to bear seem to count against this thesis: just because there are so many such features of context, and because they are so variable, it is strange to think of these features as part of the content of one's experience.³⁸

³⁷Kelly 2001b, 608. I interpret this passage as an argument that the content of experience is relatively nonconceptual. This interpretation could be questioned, especially given the last sentence of the passage, which seems to be making a claim stronger than that a subject may not possess all the concepts required to articulate the features of context on which her experience depends. But if the last sentence were claiming that contexts cannot be described in conceptual terms in some absolute sense, then the preceding sentence would not make sense as an argument for this claim — for it does not seem as though the facts either that contexts are very complicated or that what aspects of context are relevant change from time to time are the sorts of consideration which could provide reason to think that situations ‘in principle’ evade description in conceptual terms.

³⁸This is not to say that these contextual features can *never* be a part of the content of an experience;

4. The final argument from features of perception was provided by Michael Martin, who gave the example of Mary, who played a game involving a twelve-sided die in her youth, before possessing the concept of a dodecahedron, but who later, after acquiring the concept of a dodecahedron, is able to infer just from memory of her perceptions of the die that it was a dodecahedron. From this Martin infers that Mary’s original perception had the concept of a dodecahedron as part of its content; since, by hypothesis, she did not then possess the concept, this constitutes an argument for relative nonconceptual content.

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

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

But, as Vera Koffman has pointed out,³⁹ this principle is open to clear counterexamples. Consider, for example, the following case: I remember seeing an inscription on a plaque in my school of the words “Ad majorem dei gloriam”; not knowing Latin, I did not know what these words meant. Later on, I learn a bit of Latin, and, recalling my perception of this inscription, come to judge that the plaque had an inscription which meant “For the greater honor and glory of God.” So we can infer that it was part of the content of my original experience that the plaque had an inscription which meant “For the greater honor and glory of God.”

This inference is clearly fallacious. My original perception did not have this as a part of its content; I am able to infer that the inscription had this meaning because, since perceiving the plaque, I have acquired the ability to understand certain sentences of Latin. This can be turned into an objection to Martin’s example: why should we not say that Mary’s original experience did not have the concept of a dodecahedron as part of its content, but that Mary was able to infer later that her childhood game was played using a dodecahedron due to her acquisition of conceptual capacities parallel to my acquisition of the ability to understand Latin? I do not see that Martin has any reply to this objection which should convince anyone inclined to deny the existence of relative nonconceptual content.⁴⁰

Arguments from the nature of the conceptual

5. Above we discussed Heck’s arguments that we cannot construe the contents of experiences as conceptual because, were we to do so, we could have no noncircular explanation

a lighting expert might well focus on the relative illumination of different parts of a room, and we should not hesitate to describe him as experiencing different parts of a colored wall as illuminated in certain ways. (But of course this person can also have thoughts about relative illumination, so this is no argument for relative nonconceptual content.) The point is only that (i) it does not follow from the dependence of a perceived property on x that x is represented in the experience of that property, and (ii) because of the large number of contextual features relevant to perception, there is good reason to think that these contextual features are usually not part of the content of experience.

³⁹In conversation.

⁴⁰It is tempting to say that there is a disanalogy between the case of Mary and my example of the student looking at the Latin sign; surely the student possesses the concept of a word, after all, whereas we are not, it might be thought, licensed to suppose that Mary possessed the concept of shape at the time of her original experience of the dodecahedron. But this is an inessential feature of the example of the student. We can just as well imagine a student who lacks the concept of a word looking at a Latin sign on the wall, memorizing the configuration and size of the marks on it. After later acquiring the concept of a word, and after learning Latin, the student could presumably, if his memory were precise enough, then make the relevant inference. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this reply.

of how the contents of certain demonstrative thoughts, and the references of certain demonstrative concepts, are fixed. I argued that these arguments were off the mark if taken as directed at absolute nonconceptual content; do they fare any better if taken as arguments for relative nonconceptual content?

Heck's discussion does suggest an intuitive worry about the thesis that we must grasp the contents of our perceptions:

“Suppose we say, with McDowell, that my having certain demonstrative concepts is partially constitutive of the world's appearing to me in a particular way. How then can my having that concept be explained by my having such an experience? There would not seem to be sufficient distance between my having the experience and my possessing the concept for the former to *explain* the latter.” (Heck 2000, 492.)

Heck claims, plausibly, that our grasp of certain demonstrative concepts is to be explained by the having of certain perceptual experiences. But this can seem mysterious if, with the opponent of relative nonconceptual content, we require that perceivers grasp all the contents which figure in their perceptions. This seems to build into perception what perception was supposed to explain; thus the lack of ‘sufficient distance’ for the right kind of explanation.

Heck's argument may show that the opponent of relative nonconceptual content makes no room for a certain kind of causal expansion of concept possession in terms of perceptual experience, if such a causal explanation requires that explanandum – the agent's grasping the content – and the explanans – the agent's having the perceptual experience – are, for example, separated in time. But, as Heck recognizes, this does not rule out “a perfectly good, noncausal sense in which my having such an experience makes the concepts available to me: I would not have them but for having it” (493). Nor, obviously, does it rule out there being *some* causal explanation for the agent's grasping the content in question. But it is hard to see why we should demand more than this; and for this reason it is hard to see why the requirement that perceptions explain some instances of concept possession should motivate the view that the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual.⁴¹

6. Above, we briefly discussed Peacocke's argument that perceptual content cannot be explained in terms of conceptual content because the latter, but not the former, involves thinking of contents as representing an objective world. Does this give us any reason to think that the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual?

It seems not. Peacocke's claim is that certain kinds of thought require some grasp of the concept of an objective world, whereas perceptual content of at least some kinds does not require a grasp of this concept. But this does not imply anything about whether one must possess the concepts which figure in one's experience; it only tells us that there is one concept, the concept of objectivity, which one need not grasp in order to have perceptions with content, but must grasp in order to have contentful thoughts.⁴²

⁴¹The idea that the explanation of an agent's grasp of contents in terms of that agent's perceptual experiences is in some sense noncausal fits well with McDowell's discussion of the issue; surely part of the point of McDowell's rhetoric about faculties of spontaneity being active in perception is that I come to have the concept *in having the experience*.

⁴²This may seem a puzzling conclusion to discussion of this argument, for the argument appears to be simply irrelevant to either absolute or relative nonconceptual content. One possibility is that Peacocke may have some third issue to do with nonconceptual content in mind. Another possibility is that the argument should be taken primarily, not as an argument in favor of nonconceptual content, but rather as a way, available to the nonconceptualist, of vindicating McDowell's thought that only with conceptual content does one have a certain special sort of relationship to an objective world. Some indication that this

7. Finally, we come to the argument that the contents of experiences must be non-conceptual, because they fail to conform to Frege's Criterion. Above we saw that, alone among the arguments in favor of nonconceptual content, this argument was relevant to the absolute nonconceptualist's thesis; so it may come as little surprise to find that it is not relevant to the issue of relative nonconceptual content. Whether or not the contents of experience meet an expanded version of Frege's Criterion does not have any consequences for whether perceivers must grasp the contents of their perceptions.

None of our seven nonconceptualist arguments provide good reason for believing that the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual. Does the sort of McDowell-style argument discussed in §3.3 help to establish the opposite conclusion?

Above I argued that while McDowell's identification of perceptual contents with thought contents provides the simplest model of the relationship between perception of and justified belief about the world, there is no convincing argument from the fact that we have justified beliefs about the world to the (absolute) conceptual content of experience. The situation is not, I think, any more promising if we apply McDowell's argument against the thesis that the contents of experiences are relatively nonconceptual. In fact, precisely the same response given above will also suffice here. McDowell's argument, in the form discussed above, was that the contents of perceptions must be thinkable in order to explain how these perceptions can give us reasons for belief. This conclusion, were it successfully defended, would also count against the relative nonconceptualist, so long as ability to have a thought involving a content is sufficient for possession of that content. But we saw above a way in which a nonconceptualist could block this argument, and this seems as open to a relative nonconceptualist as to an absolute nonconceptualist. And McDowell seems to have no independent argument against the view that the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual.

4.3 What we should say about relative nonconceptual content

So, as was the case with absolute nonconceptual content, none of the main arguments for or against relative nonconceptual content give us much of a reason to go one way or the other with respect to the question of whether the contents of perceptions are relatively nonconceptual.

As I indicated above, I am inclined to think that questions about what concepts subjects possess should be reformulated in terms of what thoughts or beliefs those subjects are capable of having. If we adopt this reformulation, the question about relative nonconceptual content comes to this: are there ways that the world is represented in the experience of subjects which those subjects are incapable of believing to be the case or entertaining in thought? When the question is put this way, I am inclined to think that we should say that there is no such thing as relative nonconceptual content. It seems to me that when I perceive the world as being some way, I am always able to believe that it is that way, or doubt whether it is that way, etc. On the thought-based view of theories of concept possession, this is enough to show that the contents of my perceptions are not relatively nonconceptual. As was the case with the provisional conclusion reached in the discussion of absolute nonconceptual content, I do not think that the intuitions I have adduced in favor of this conclusion provide conclusive reasons for endorsing it. But I do think that, in the absence of arguments one way or another, it is reasonable to be guided by them.

is the best way to view Peacocke's thought here may be found in Peacocke 2001a. On this interpretation, we should dismiss Peacocke's claim that the distinction between objective content and content thought of as objective provides a reason for thinking of perceptual content as nonconceptual.

One caveat is in order. It may be the case that some lower animals do have experiences which represent the world as being one way or another, but are not capable of having thoughts, beliefs, or other ‘cognitive’ propositional attitudes. In this case, we should say that the contents of the experiences of such creatures are relatively nonconceptual. But, for by now familiar reasons, this does not imply anything about the nature of human perception.

Someone might now object: I grant that for any way the world is presented in experience, you are capable of believing the world to be that way, or doubting the world to be that way, etc. But do you really *possess the concepts* involved in the thought that the world is that way?

We reached a similar stage above in the discussion of absolute nonconceptual content. There I suggested that we should say that the same kinds of contents are involved in perception and belief, and imagined someone asking the further question, “Yes, but is this kind of content conceptual or not?” I suggested that there was no reason to regard this question as anything other than terminological; and I am inclined to say the same thing about the present question as whether one really possesses the concepts in question. If possession of a concept is not simply the ability to have thoughts and beliefs involving the concept, then I do not see that we have enough of a grip on what concept possession is supposed to be to meaningfully ask, let alone answer, this question.

5 Conclusion

I have discussed two different senses that we might give to the question, “Are the contents of experience nonconceptual?” I have concluded that none of the main arguments in the field are very convincing with respect to either sense of the question. Nonetheless, I think that there is a positive moral which, perhaps tentatively, we can draw from the foregoing. I have suggested that in the absence of compelling arguments for the conclusions that the contents of perceptions are either absolutely or relatively nonconceptual, we have good, even if less than conclusive reasons for thinking that the contents of perception are both absolutely and relatively conceptual. One consequence of the former conclusion is that issues about the proper framework for discussing the contents of thought, of language, and of perception, are best not pursued in isolation from each other. If the contents of perceptions are absolutely conceptual, then a position which I think that many would otherwise find attractive, which treats the contents of perception as (something like) Russellian propositions and the contents of thought and language as finer-grained Fregean propositions, is thereby ruled out. And, more generally, views about the right characterization of the objects of belief, or about the right shape of a semantic theory, should be expected to have consequences for the philosophy of perception — and vice versa.

I leave it an open question whether there is a third understanding of what “nonconceptual content” might mean with respect to which the arguments I’ve considered might be more convincing. I do think that there is a natural understanding of questions about nonconceptual content which I have not discussed, but which seems to be in the background of McDowell’s discussions of the issue.⁴³ This is the Kantian question of how far one’s conceptual capacities — one’s abilities to have thoughts involving certain kinds of concepts — go toward shaping the contents of one’s experience. We should agree that acquisition of new concepts enables one to garner more information from perception; but is this a matter of the new concepts entering into the content of one’s perceptions, or of

⁴³I have in mind his many discussions of the involvement of a faculty of spontaneity in perception.

one simply being able to infer more sophisticated beliefs from a more or less stable perceptual content? This does strike me as an interesting and fundamental question with broad consequences for our understanding of the nature of intentionality; but it is independent of issues about both absolute and relative nonconceptual content and, so far as I can see, is not decided either way by the arguments canvassed above.

I suspect that interest in this third question has driven much of the recent interest in nonconceptual content. But if this is so, then progress will require work of a very different kind than has been done thus far.⁴⁴

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