

Does Perceptual Experience Have Conceptual Content?

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My thesis in this essay is:

(CC) Sense experiential states have conceptual content.

I take it for granted that sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs; indeed, this claim forms the first premise of my central argument for (CC).¹ The subsequent stages of the argument are intended to establish that a person has such a reason for believing something about the way things are in the world around him only if he is in some mental state or other with a conceptual content: a conceptual state. Thus, given that sense experiential states do provide reasons for empirical beliefs, they must have conceptual content.

The plan of the essay is this. After characterizing as precisely as possible *conceptual content* itself, I offer an argument for the claim that sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content.² As I say, I assume without argument that sense experiential states do indeed provide such reasons. So this constitutes my *prima facie* argument for (CC) (section I). Then (in sections II and III), I consider a number of recent critical discussions of (CC).³

I

As I am using it, a *conceptual state* – that is to say, a mental state with *conceptual content* – is one whose content is the content of a possible *judgment by the subject*. So, a mental state is *conceptual*, in this sense, if and only if it has a representational content which is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself

possesses, and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a premise or the conclusion of a deductive argument, or of an inference of some other kind (e.g. inductive or abductive).⁴ The requirement that the content has a form which enables it to serve as the premise or conclusion of an inference captures the idea that conceptual contents are the contents of *judgments* – those mental acts which are the source of, and are themselves susceptible to, rational inferential justification in the light of their essential concern with the truth, their norm of correctly registering how things are. The requirement that the component concepts, which articulate inferential premises and conclusions in a way which makes explicit this inferential justificational power, should, in the case of a conceptual state, actually be possessed by the subject captures the idea that this should be a possible judgment *by that very subject*.⁵

My central argument for (CC) has the following overall form.

- (1) Sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs.
 - (2) Sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content.
- ∴ (CC) Sense experiential states have conceptual content.

I assume (1) without argument here. My argument for (2) proceeds in two stages, which mirror the two components of the notion of conceptual content identified above. The first stage makes explicit the connection between reasons and inference, and hence between giving reasons and identifying contents of a form which enables them to serve as the premises and conclusions of inferences. The second establishes a constraint upon genuine reasons – reasons *for the subject* – imposed by the way in which his own conceptual resources are available for the configuration of his mental states. Recalling the definition of conceptual mental states given above, as those with a representational content which is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself possesses and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a premise or the conclusion of a deductive argument or of an inference of some other kind, this yields the required conclusion, that having reasons in general consists in being in a conceptual mental state, and hence, in particular, that sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content. I take each of the two stages in turn.

A reason is necessarily a reason *for* something. In the current context, sense experiential states are to provide reasons for the subject's making a particular judgment, or holding a certain belief, about how things are in the world around her. To give the subject's reason in this context is to identify some feature of her situation which makes the relevant judgment or belief appropriate, or intelligible, from the point of view of rationality. It is, paraphrasing McDowell (1985, p. 389), to mention considerations which reveal the judgment or belief as at least approximating to what rationally ought to happen in those circumstances. Now, making something intelligible from the point of view of rationality in this way necessarily involves identifying a valid deductive argument, or inference of some other kind, which articulates the source of the rational obligation (or permission) in question. This constitutes an explicit reconstruction of the reasoning in virtue of whose correctness this obligation (or permission) is sustained. For *rational* intelligibility, or appropriateness of the kind revealed

by giving reasons, just is that mode of approbation which is made explicit by the reconstruction of *valid reasoning* of some such kind to a conclusion which is suitably related to the judgment or belief for which the reasons are being given.⁶ Hence, in making essential reference to the relevant valid inference, giving a reason involves making essential reference to its premises and conclusion, and so, trivially, to the kinds of things which can serve as the premises or conclusion of some kind of inference. In keeping with the standard usage, I call such contents *propositions*. This, then, is the first premise of my argument for (2): giving reasons involves identifying certain relevant propositions – those contents which figure as the premises and conclusions of inferences explicitly articulating the reasoning involved. In particular, sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only in virtue of their appropriate relations with propositions suitably inferentially related to the contents of the beliefs in question.

Second, we are interested here not just in any old reasons which there may be for making judgments or holding beliefs – such as their simply happening to be true, or beneficial in some mysterious way to the subject's overall well-being – but only in reasons *for the subject* to do these things, to take things actually to be the way she believes them to be. These must be the subject's *own* reasons, which figure as such *from her point of view*, in virtue of her being in the sense experiential states which provide such reasons. It follows from this that the premise propositions, suitably inferentially related to the contents of the beliefs in question, cannot be related to the relevant sense experiential states merely *indirectly*, as some kind of extrinsic characterization on the part of the theorist. Rather, they must actually *be* the contents of these experiential states, in a sense which requires that the subject has all of their constituent concepts. Otherwise, even though being in such states may make it advisable, relative to a certain external end or need, for her to make the judgment or hold the belief in question, it cannot provide *her own* reason for doing so. Thus, sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content: this is (2) above.

The two stages of this argument for (2) can be illustrated by consideration of an apparently alternative conception of the rational role of sense experience. It is agreed on this conception both that this role is to be characterized by the association between the sense experiences involved and some form of reasoning, and that conceptual contents are identified by their role in deductive and other inferential reasoning. The key difference, it is claimed, between the rational role of sense experience and that of thought or judgment is that the relevant background reasoning capacities in the former case are essentially imagistic. So, crudely, just as the rational role of the thought that $[p \ \& \ q]$ in sustaining the judgment that p depends upon the deductive validity of the inference from $[p \ \& \ q]$ to p , the rational role of a perception of two figures in sustaining the judgment that they are identical in size and shape depends upon the correctness of a certain imagistic rotation and translation of the one figure into the other in connection with this judgment. Thus, a person sees the two figures in question, A and B, say; and she arrives at the judgment that they are identical in size and shape by imaginatively transforming A into B by a certain rotation and translation. She has a reason for her resultant belief that A and B are identical in size and shape. Her sense experience of A and B provides her reason for this empirical belief.

Yet there is, according to the proponent of this alternative conception, no need to regard the content of this sense experience as *conceptual*. For the reasoning in which it is involved, in virtue of which it provides the subject's reason for belief, is neither deductive nor strictly inferential of any other kind. So we do not even need to postulate the involvement of conceptual contents in this process of reasoning at all, except at the final stage of judgment, of course, never mind identify such propositions with the contents of the experiences in question.

This account faces at least the following two questions. First, what sustains the "correctness" of this imagistic reasoning? Second, how does its correctness in this sense provide the subject with *her* reason for belief?

In connection with the first, I claim that the "correctness" of the reasoning in question, with respect to the target judgment that A and B are identical in size and shape, is due to the deductive validity of the following argument.

- (a) If two figures can be moved one onto the other by translation and rotation, then they are identical in size and shape.
- (b) That_A figure can be transformed into that_B one by translating and rotating thus.⁷
- ∴ (c) A and B are identical in size and shape.

Clearly, not any old experiential manipulation counts as genuine imagistic *reasoning*, in the sense in which such reasoning is what backs the rational role of sense experience, according to the proposal under consideration. In order to serve this role, the manipulation in question must make the subject's belief in the proposition that A and B are identical in size and shape rationally appropriate. Insofar as it succeeds in doing so, I can see no alternative to the deductive argument above as the ultimate source of this rational appropriateness. It is precisely because this argument is valid that the manipulation which she performs in transforming A into B by translation and rotation makes her judgment that A and B are identical in size appropriate, or intelligible, from the point of view of rationality; and this is what it is for her experience to provide her with a reason for her belief.

More is required than simply the abstract existence, as it were, of this rational appropriateness, if her sense experience is to provide *her reason* for the empirical belief in question, if it is to make her believing that A and B are identical in size and shape actually reasonable *for her*. It would be no good, for example, if she were simply manipulating the experienced figures at random in her imagination, and found herself believing that they are identical in size and shape as the first thing which came into her head. The correctness of the imagistic reasoning which she performs in connection with the judgment that A and B are identical in size provides her reason for this belief only if she has some recognition of its correctness in this regard. I contend that it is a necessary condition upon her recognizing her reason for belief *as a reason*, in this sense, that her grasp of (a) and (b) should be in some way operative in her transition from her imagistic manipulation to her belief in (c). Of course, (a) is most likely to be a standing piece of background knowledge on her part, informing her move from (b) to (c). The key point for present purposes is that she actually endorses (b), and effectively deduces (c) from it in the context of background knowledge of (a). This, I claim, is precisely what her performance of the relevant piece of imagistic rea-

soning consists in. It is no idle experiential manipulation, but the directed endorsement of (b) as a ground for (c), in the light of (a). What makes this a piece of *imagistic* reasoning is the point noted earlier, that grasp of (b) is essentially experiential. For “that_A,” “that_B,” and “thus,” as they occur in this premise, are all perceptual demonstratives, which depend for their correct understanding both upon the subject’s actually standing in the relevant experiential relations with A and B, and upon her actually making the translational rotational transformation of A into B which she makes in imagination on this basis. The sense experience which provides her reason for belief therefore has precisely the content of premise (b), which is by definition conceptual: it constitutes the premise of a deductive argument, and has to be grasped by the subject in a sense which requires that she possess all of its constituent concepts. Contrary to initial appearances, then, the proposed alternative conception of the rational role of sense experience as grounded in peculiarly imagistic reasoning serves rather to illustrate and further reinforce the two-stage argument set out above for premise (2) of my central argument for (CC). I therefore take (2) to be established: sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content.

Given my standing assumption of premise (1), this completes the *prima facie* case for (CC). In what follows, I attempt to provide further support for the conceptualist claim, and to round out my initial argument, by considering a series of recent critical discussions of this idea that the content of sense experiential states is conceptual.

II

Richard Heck (2000) presents a number of considerations, both against the conceptualist claim itself, and against premise (2) of my argument for (CC). I begin, in this section, with the former.

An initial objection to the conceptualist account of perceptual content is that this fails to capture the richness, or fineness of grain, in our sense experience. For surely a person can discriminate more shades of red in visual perception, say, than he has concepts of such shades, like “scarlet,” for example. The standard conceptualist response to this initial objection is to exploit the availability of demonstrative concepts of color shades, like “that_R shade,” said or thought while attending to a particular sample, R.⁸ Now, Heck agrees both that such demonstrative phrases do express genuine *concepts* of determinate color shades, and that these are actually available for use in thought by a subject attending appropriately to the sample in normal viewing conditions; but he insists that the conceptualist claim that such concepts capture the way in which the color of R is presented *in sense experience* is incompatible with a strong intuition that it is the way in which colors are so presented which *explains* how the subject had access to such demonstrative color-shade concepts in thought.

The conceptualist claims that sense experiential states have conceptual content, in particular that fine-grained color shades are experientially presented as falling under *demonstrative* concepts. Heck objects that this is incompatible with the idea that it is

a person's experience of particular color samples which *explains* his possession of such demonstrative concepts. His argument must be this.

- (a) A person's sense experience of color samples *explains* his possession of the demonstrative color concepts under which they fall.
- (b) If experience is to *explain* a person's possession of a concept, C, then its content cannot involve C as a constituent.
- ∴ (c) Experiences of color samples do not have demonstrative color concepts as constituents.
- ∴ (d) The conceptualist's response to the Richness Argument fails.

Although Heck himself admits that he finds this argument compelling, he also grants explicitly that the conceptualist may, and indeed is likely to, resist it, by denying (b). The idea would be that, in the sense in which experience *explains* demonstrative concept possession, the explanation is constitutive rather than causal. On the conceptualist view, experience of a color sample, R, just is a matter of entertaining a content in which the demonstrative concept "that_R shade" figures as a constituent. Thus, it is, in a perfectly natural sense, *because* he has the experience which he has that the subject is able to employ that concept in thought. In virtue of his entertaining the concept in experience, it is available for further use in judgment and belief.⁹ Still, Heck pushes the anti-conceptualist argument further. For there are two consequences of the conceptualist account as it is now set up which he finds unacceptable. First, it is incompatible with any substantive account of what fixes the semantic value of the demonstrative color concepts involved. Second, it rules out the possibility of certain types of perceptual error, which evidently arise. I consider these in turn.

(CC) is indeed incompatible with an *Evansian* account of what fixes the semantic value of demonstrative concepts, on which "that_R shade" is a concept of the fine-grained color of R in virtue of the fact that the subject's attitudes towards contents containing it are suitably sensitive to information about that color delivered mainly in perception (Evans, 1982, pp. 145ff; Heck, 2000, p. 493). For this account is rendered viciously circular by the claim that possession of such perceptual information is a matter of entertaining that very concept. It is not the only possible substantive account of what fixes the semantic value of demonstrative color concepts, though. For example, the conceptualist may well be inclined to develop the following closely related proposal. "That_R shade" is a concept of the fine-grained color of R in virtue of the fact that the subject's attitudes towards contents containing it are suitably sensitive *that color itself*, where this sensitivity in large part depends upon his normal neurophysiological perceptual processing. So Heck's first further consequence is no consequence at all of the conceptualist account as it now stands.

Nor, I argue now, is his second. He asks us to consider the perceptual judgment expressed by a person's utterance of "*that* part of my desk is *that* color," pointing twice at the same part of her desk. This judgment is bound to be true. For the demonstrative "that color" refers to the color which the relevant part of her desk actually has. Yet her perceptual experience may be mistaken in the color it presents that part of her desk as being. So the content of her experience cannot be that of the perceptual demonstrative judgment, as the conceptualist account proposes. More generally,

the present version of conceptualism is incompatible with the evident possibility of perceptual misrepresentation.

Evans's own work on demonstrative thought suggests a response to this line of objection (Evans, 1982, chapter 6, 1984). Demonstrative reference to a particular object depends, in Evans's view, on the subject's capacity to *keep track* of the object in question over time, appropriately modifying her attitudes and responses to its movement or her changing position in relation to it (Evans, 1982, chapter 6). Failure to exercise this capacity results in a failed attempt at a demonstrative thought about that thing, although the subject may of course instead be capable of entertaining various other kinds of thoughts, some of which may be true, some false. Similarly, then, the conceptualist might insist that there are tracking conditions upon successful demonstrative reference to the fine-grained colors of the things within her view. In particular, she must have some ability to keep track of the shade in question over certain variations in viewing conditions: some changes of perspective, lighting, the presence or absence of shadows, and so on. Given that she is tracking the color of something which she is looking at in this way, then her experience of it consists in her entertaining the conceptual content "that is colored thus," which is indeed bound to be true. Errors in color perception are perfectly possible on this account, though, when the required tracking fails, and the relevant demonstrative color concept "colored thus" is not available for the subject. Her experience in the relevant respect consists in a failed attempt to grasp that concept, a failed attempt at demonstrative reference to the specific shade in question, and is therefore, and in that sense, mistaken. So perceptual error is perfectly possible on the conceptualist account as it is now set up, and Heck's second accusation is also mistaken.

Thus, I conclude that Heck's first wave of arguments, targeted directly against the conceptualist thesis (CC) itself, fail.¹⁰

Christopher Peacocke (2001) offers a number of additional arguments in favor of the claim that a level of non-conceptual content is essential to a proper understanding of the relations between sense experiential states and full blown thoughts about the world presented in experience, and so against the conceptualist account of sense experiential content, (CC). I focus in this section on his treatment of two such issues: the roles of non-conceptual experiential content in, first, a philosophical account of perceptual demonstrative concept possession, and, second, a causal developmental account of observational concept acquisition. In each case, he argues that an account of sense experiential content as involving demonstrative concepts of colors and other properties fails properly to capture the relevant role of experience in relation to thought.¹¹

An initial problem for the conceptualist is the apparent insistence that all color experience depends upon possession of the general concept of a color *shade*. For the canonical expression of the demonstrative concepts purportedly involved in color experience is "that_R shade," grasp of which clearly depends upon possession of this general concept. Yet the idea that a person must have the general concept in order to perceive objects as having various specific shades is quite implausible. Peacocke (2001, p. 245) also claims that the conceptualist's assumption that any "good, successfully referring perceptual demonstrative contain some general concept" is independently objectionable. For there are "cases in which a wholly unsupplemented

perceptual demonstrative ‘that’ still secures reference in a suitable perceptual context” (ibid., p. 246). This looks, at first sight, like a point conducive to the conceptualist, as it provides a way of avoiding the implausible suggestion that all color experience depends upon possession of the general concept of a color *shade*. Peacocke goes on to develop a natural treatment of these cases of conceptually unsupplemented perceptual demonstrative reference, though, which is incompatible with (CC). This is the first point mentioned above, against the conceptualist account of sense experiential content. The basic idea is that determinacy of reference is secured by the supplementation of the bare demonstrative element, “that,” by a non-conceptual *way* in which the relevant shade, shape, movement, or whatever, is presented in experience. He goes on to develop this idea with great subtlety and sophistication. It suffices for my purposes here, though, simply to remark once again upon the availability of an alternative treatment which is consistent with (CC). On this view, determinacy of reference is secured by the supplementation of the bare demonstrative “that,” by the subject’s actual attention to the *color* of the object in question, as opposed to its shape or movement, say, where this is a neurophysiologically enabled relation between the subject and *that property*, as opposed to any other, of the object which he is perceiving.

Second, Peacocke argues that the conceptualist cannot satisfactorily account for the phenomenon of learning a new observational concept, such as *pyramid*. For the subject’s sense experience, on presentation with a positive instance in a teaching context, must be sufficient for her rationally to apply the concept. Yet this experience cannot have a content which includes the concept *pyramid* itself, if it is to serve as a means to her *acquisition* of it. “The natural solution to this . . . quandary,” Peacocke (2001, p. 252) continues,

is to acknowledge that there is such a thing as having an experience of something as being pyramid shaped that does not involve already having the concept of being pyramid shaped. What such an experience will have is a non-conceptual content which, if correct, is sufficient for something’s falling under the observational concept *pyramid*.

I agree entirely with the first sentence of this passage; but reject the implication of the second that the conceptualist cannot make the required acknowledgment. Surely we may continue instead as follows. “What such an experience will have is a conceptual content involving the demonstrative concept, ‘that (shape),’ referring to the pyramid shape of the object in question.” Of course, the same cannot be said in explanation of her acquisition of the concept “that (shape)” itself; but the conceptualist will claim that her appropriately attending to, and tracking, the shape of the object in question just is her entertaining that concept in experience. That is, she acquires it precisely in virtue of standing in these attentional and tracking relations with the actual shape of the object in the world.

Sean Kelley (2001) argues that color perception fails to satisfy a plausible condition upon the possession of demonstrative color concepts, and therefore that (CC) fails properly to capture the way in which colors are presented in experience. The condition which he cites is this: “in order to possess a demonstrative concept for x, a subject

must be able consistently to re-identify a given object or property as falling under the concept if it does” (ibid., p. 403, italics removed). He calls it the *re-identification condition*. I agree that the conceptualist should accept this as a necessary condition upon the subject’s possession of demonstrative color concepts of the kind which are invoked in the present development of (CC). Kelley then presents us with the following case, in which a person is able to distinguish between colors on the basis of his experience, yet is incapable consistently of re-identifying one of them later. First, the subject is presented a number of times with samples of two similar shades of green, which he is consistently right in asserting are distinct. Second, his answers are at chance in response to the question, of one of these samples, whether it is the shade which was previously presented on the left. Generalizing, Kelley insists that “there’s nothing in the nature of *perception* to keep it from being true, that our capacity to discriminate colors exceeds our capacity to re-identify the colors discriminated” (ibid., p. 411). He therefore concludes that the conceptualist account of color experience is mistaken.

I entirely agree with Kelley that the conceptualist cannot simply deny the possibility of the case as described. I also acknowledge that a second response which he offers, of denying that the subject actually *experiences* either shade in the first phase, is desperate and quite *ad hoc*. There *are* cases where something along these lines may be correct, in which a person’s successful behavior is controlled by a perceptually mediated sensitivity to a given feature of, or quantity in, the world, even though it is intuitively wrong to say that she actually experiences that feature, or quantity, as such. Still, I grant quite freely that Kelley’s case is not to be assimilated to these: the subject’s initial shade discrimination is genuinely experiential.

There are two points which can be made on the conceptualist’s behalf, though. Both urge that *an* appropriate re-identification condition may still be met in Kelley’s case, so as to reinstate the claim that the subject’s initial experiential discrimination is conceptual.

First, consider the re-identification condition as it applies to possession of demonstrative concepts of particular individuals. This cannot require that a person be capable consistently of recognizing or re-identifying the particular in question after a complete break in experience. For nobody is capable under those conditions of distinguishing two qualitatively identical but numerically distinct such things, and any particular object *could* have such a twin; yet this does not make demonstrative reference to such individuals impossible. The right way to think of re-identification in this case, it seems to me, is in terms of the subject’s capacity, first, to keep track of the thing in question over its movement or her changing position in relation to; and, second, to make sense at least of the *possibility*, under certain specific conditions, of its numerical identity with an object encountered after a break in experience. In parallel with this observation, then, the conceptualist may hold that what re-identification requires, insofar as this really is a necessary condition upon demonstrative color concept possession, is rather the following two abilities on the subject’s part: first, to keep track of the same shade over various changing viewing conditions – such as a gradual brightening/dimming of the light, the movement of shadows across the relevant colored object, and so on – during a single extended period of observation;

second, to make sense at least of the *possibility*, under certain specific conditions, that things encountered in the future, after a break in experience, are genuinely identical in shade with the initial sample.

Now, nothing in Kelley's case, as described so far, rules out the subject's ability to keep track of both shades of green in just this sense. Still, he may be inclined to modify the case in order stipulatively to rule this out, and continue to claim that nothing in the nature of *perception* makes the modified case impossible. A conceptualist *might*, with more plausibility than earlier in my view, bite the bullet at this point, and rely on the force of the argument *for* (CC) to insist that this new case must in fact be impossible; but there is a second point which may be more compelling.

This would be to claim that the initial, discriminating sense experience is irreducibly relational in content, presenting the two samples as "colored *thus-in-relation-to-that*." This is a complex demonstrative color concept, which picks out both of the shades of green presented, but in a way which is essentially context-dependent. It identifies them *in relation to each other*. Still, I contend, this complex demonstrative will display sufficient context-independence to meet the relevant re-identification requirement in Kelley's case. The subject will be able consistently to re-identify both shades in relation to each other for some time at least after the initial encounter. Indeed, the case of the paint color chips serves to my mind to reinforce this claim. Looking at a series of such chips together, suppose that you arrive at the view that one of them is the best color for the room you are about to paint. Having dropped them, it may well be very difficult to re-identify that shade by picking them up and looking at them individually one by one. You can normally pick it out by looking at a few of them together, thereby recognizing it as "that-shade-in-relation-to-these." This is precisely what is involved in meeting the relevant re-identification requirement for the complex, relational demonstrative color concept concerned.

This response is similar in spirit to one which Kelley considers explicitly, according to which the conceptual content of the subject's initial discriminating experience is "that there is that difference between the two samples" (Kelley, 2001, p. 417, italics removed). He replies, first, that it is not at all clear how the conceptualist could argue that this *must* be the right analysis of the situation; and, second, that this notion of a demonstrative identification of a color shade difference needs to be worked out in detail before the suggestion is fully satisfactory. Both replies may equally be offered against my own proposal of invoking relational demonstrative color concepts. The latter is perfectly apt in that context; but I see no good reason to believe that the required detail cannot possibly be provided. I would counter the former by putting weight on my initial argument for (CC). In the light of that argument, the subject's initial discrimination must be made on the basis of a sense experiential state with *some* conceptual content. Given his failure in connection with the associated re-identification requirements, this cannot involve the simple demonstrative concepts of the two shades of green, "that₁ shade" and "that₂ shade," say. Further reflection on re-identifying paint color samples, though, suggests an alternative candidate conceptual content, employing relational demonstratives. This is not in any obvious way objectionable, and indeed has in my view considerable independent plausibility. So there is good reason, provisionally at least, to accept that account of the case.

I conclude that the recent direct objections to (CC) which I have considered are unconvincing. The initial argument for (CC) has also attracted criticisms, though; and, especially given the additional weight which I just placed upon this in defending the conceptualist against direct attack, it is appropriate at this point to turn to these.

III

As I mentioned above, both Heck and Peacocke offer objections to the second premise of my argument for (CC): (2) sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content. They focus on the second stage of the argument, which moves from the claim that the reasons in question are *the subject's* reasons for believing what she does to the conclusion that the sense experiential states which provide those reasons should actually have as their contents the conceptually articulated propositions figuring in the background argument which makes explicit their rational bearing on the beliefs in question. That move rests upon the requirement that reasons for the subject must be recognizable as such, and susceptible to rational scrutiny and evaluation *by her*. Heck and Peacocke each accept the requirement; but they go on to argue, along somewhat similar lines, that the move is a non-sequitur. I begin by discussing Peacocke's proposal by which he contends that the non-conceptualist is capable of meeting the *recognition requirement*.

His key idea is that the required recognition, scrutiny, and evaluation of the status of the reasons provided by sense experiential states for empirical beliefs may be achieved by invoking the subject's capacity for demonstrative reference to the, nevertheless *non-conceptual*, ways in which things are presented in experience:

a thinker can ask "Is something's looking that way a reason for judging that it's square?," for instance. On the approach I advocate, "that way," in this particular occurrence, refers demonstratively to a way in which something can be perceived. The reference itself is made *by* something conceptual: demonstrative concepts can enter conceptual contents. There is no requirement that the reference *of* the demonstrative be conceptualized. . . . So thought can scrutinize and evaluate the relations between non-conceptual and conceptual contents and obtain a comprehensive view of both. (Peacocke, 2001, pp. 255-6)

I am not confident that I properly understand Peacocke's proposal here. For I find it difficult to interpret it other than as a variant of the second-order approach, which he grants is unacceptable. The suggestion certainly *seems* to be that a person's recognition of her experientially based reason for believing that something she sees is square, say, consists in her appreciation both that her experience presents that thing in the world in *that way_w*, and that something's looking that way_w is a reason to believe that it is square. Thus, she derives the conclusion that she has a reason for believing that it is square. Yet this suggestion has all the serious difficulties familiar from discussions of classical foundationalism, both in accounting for the subject's knowledge of the nature of her experience, as presenting the object in question in that way_w, and in explaining her reasons for believing that something's looking that way_w is a reason to believe that it is square.¹²

The only alternative which I can see would be to interpret the subject's *appreciation* both that her experience presents the relevant object in that way_w, and that something's looking that way_w is a reason to believe that it is square, simply in terms of her standing inclination, in conditions of perception which are not evidently abnormal in some relevant respect, to judge that something which is experientially presented to her in that way_w is square. Yet this is effectively to deny that she has any real recognition of her reason *as a reason*, or engages in any reflective scrutiny or evaluation of it as such.

On the conceptualist account, on the other hand, this dilemma is avoidable. For entertaining a conceptual content is a matter of grasping its truth condition on the basis of the way in which this is systematically determined by the semantic values of its components and their mode of combination, which are in turn precisely what determine its inferential relations with other such contents. Thus, a person's actually *being in* a sense experiential state with a conceptual content requires her grasp of that content in just the way which grounds its reason-giving status. Hence she automatically recognizes its status as such.

So, I contend that Peacocke's proposal, as I understand it at least, does not provide a satisfactory account of how the non-conceptualist is capable of meeting the recognition requirement upon the reason-giving role of sense experience.

Heck begins, along similar lines to Peacocke, by claiming that the conceptualist argument for (2) depends upon a mistaken assumption that any accurate reflective thought about sense experiential content must share, or at least embed, the actual content of the experience itself. More precisely, the assumption he uncovers is as follows. "The content of a judgment about how things appear to me, when such a judgment is correctly made, is the same as the content of one of my perceptual states" (Heck, 2000, p. 513). This assumption is clearly illegitimate, as it entails conceptualism directly, with the addition only of the uncontroversial claim that correct judgments about how things appear to me in perception are possible. For the contents of any such judgments are themselves conceptual by definition. Like Peacocke, Heck continues by offering a positive account of how it is possible to engage in effective reflective recognition, scrutiny, and evaluation, at the conceptual level, of the reason-giving status of *non-conceptual* sense experiential states. My complaint against this is, likewise, not that conceptual thought about non-conceptual contents is simply impossible – the assumption which Heck uncovers is not essential to the conceptualist case – but rather that it is bound to involve an unacceptable second-order account of how the recognition requirement is met for the reasons provided by sense experiential states.

Suppose that a person is in a sense experiential state with non-conceptual content. Evans offers the following description of how he may arrive at a correct conceptual judgment which captures how things appear to him in that experience.

[A] subject can gain knowledge of his internal informational [e.g. perceptual] states in a very simple way: by re-using precisely those skills of conceptualization that he uses to make judgments about the world. Here is how he can do it. He goes through exactly the same procedure as he would go through if he were trying to make a judgment about how it is at this place now, but excluding any knowledge he has *of an extraneous kind*.

(That is, he seeks to determine what he would judge if he did not have such extraneous information.) The result will necessarily be closely correlated with the content of the informational state which he is in at that time. . . . This is a way of producing in himself . . . a cognitive state [e.g. a judgment of appearance] whose content is *systematically* dependent upon the content of the informational state. (Evans, 1982, pp. 227–8, quoted by Heck, 2000, at p. 515)

Even if this Evansian description is entirely unobjectionable, the consequent account of how the recognition requirement is met in perception, presumably, still has the following, second-order, form.

- (a) It appears to me that p.
- (b) Its appearing to me that p gives me a reason to believe that p.
- ∴ (c) I have a reason to believe that p.

It is therefore subject to all the familiar difficulties facing classical foundationalism, of providing satisfactory reasons, meeting, as they must, the recognition requirement, in connection with the subject's beliefs at both (a) and (b) of this argument.¹³

There is strong *prima facie* motivation for the conceptualist account of sense experiential content in my initial central argument for (CC). Objections to (CC) itself are unconvincing; and criticisms of the second premise of that central argument are also wanting. I therefore conclude that:

(CC) Sense experiential states have conceptual content.

Notes

- 1 See Brewer (1999, esp. chapters 2 and 3), for extended argument in support of this assumption.
- 2 This draws heavily on (Brewer, 1999, section 5.1). It receives further elucidation and defense in sections 5.2 and 5.3; and I engage with a number of important criticisms in Brewer (2001a, b).
- 3 In particular, I discuss Heck (2000), Peacocke (2001), and Kelly (2001).
- 4 Note that such contents may be ineliminably *demonstrative*, the component concepts of which can only be grasped by a person actually standing in certain perceptual-attentional relations with their semantic values, or by someone who has done so within the range of his capacity to retain the relevant demonstrative concepts in memory. This inclusion is extremely important to my own account of how it is that sense experiential states provide the reasons which they do for empirical beliefs. See Brewer (1999, esp. chapter 6).
- 5 Note that this way of understanding "conceptual content" is incompatible with a constraint upon the notion which Heck (2000, p. 486) ascribes to Evans (1982), and himself intends to respect, namely, that the claim that even the content of belief is conceptual should be substantive rather than trivially definitional. If, as I take is the case, belief is the upshot of judgment by the subject in question, then belief content is conceptual by definition on my understanding. Stalnaker (1998) clearly respects Heck's constraint in arguing that *all* content is non-conceptual. As he means it, this is certainly an interesting and substantive thesis; but it is not properly put in these terms as I use them here. My concern is with the

extent to which perception is to be assimilated to judgment, in respect of the nature and type of its content. In the context of an understanding of conceptual states as those whose content is the content of a possible judgment by the subject, this raises precisely the question of my title: do sense experiential states have conceptual content?

- 6 Note here that I intend “validity” to be interpreted very widely, to capture the correctness or acceptability of inductive and abductive reasoning as well as formal deductive validity.
- 7 Note that this second premise is only available to be thought by the subject in virtue of her actual experiential relations with A and B, and of the imaginative manipulation which she performs on the basis of these relations. For “that_A,” “that_B,” and “thus” are all essentially experiential perceptual demonstratives. Still, (b) is none the worse for that. Indeed, this fact helps to explain the sense in which the reasoning in question is *imagistic*.
- 8 For more detailed presentation of both the initial objection and the demonstrative response, along with supporting references, see McDowell (1994, lecture III, and afterword, part II) and Brewer (1999, section 5.3.1).
- 9 See Brewer (2001a, in discussion with Eilan) for further development of the objection and reply here.
- 10 I consider below, in section III, his further arguments against premise (2) of my argument for (CC).
- 11 I return, in section III, to a discussion of his further claim, *pace* my premise (2) above, that a non-conceptualist account of the content of sense experiential states is capable of explaining their role in providing reasons for empirical beliefs.
- 12 See Brewer (1999, chapter 4) for extended criticism of any second-order account of how the recognition requirement is met in perceptual knowledge.
- 13 Again, see Brewer (1999, chapter 4) for far more on this.

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Perception and Conceptual Content

Alex Byrne

Perceptual experiences justify beliefs – that much seems obvious. As Brewer puts it, “sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs” (this volume). In *Mind and World* McDowell (1994, p. 162) argues that we can get from this apparent platitude to the controversial claim that perceptual experiences have conceptual content: “we can coherently credit experiences with rational relations to *judgment* and belief, but only if we take it that spontaneity is already implicated in receptivity; that is, only if we take it that experiences have conceptual content.” Brewer agrees. Their view is sometimes called *conceptualism*; *non-conceptualism* is the rival position, that experiences have non-conceptual content. One initial obstacle is understanding what the issue is. What is conceptual content, and how is it different from non-conceptual content?

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

1 Two Conceptions of Conceptual and Non-conceptual Content

1.1 Concepts

Start with “concepts.” What are they, and what is it to “possess” one? The “concept” terminology in the philosophical literature is at least three ways ambiguous, and often writers do not explicitly say which sense they have in mind. In the *psychological* sense, a concept is a mental representation of a category: something that is (literally) in the head, perhaps a (semantically interpreted) word in a language of thought. Thus, the mentalese word that applies to all and only horses, if there is such a thing, is the concept *horse*, or (in the more usual notation) HORSE. Someone possesses HORSE just in case this mental representation is part of her cognitive machinery.

In the *Fregean* sense (pun intended), concepts are certain kinds of Fregean senses, specifically Fregean senses of predicates (e.g. “is a horse”). They are supposed to be constituents, together with other kinds of senses (e.g. senses of singular terms like “Seabiscuit”) of the senses of sentences (e.g. “Seabiscuit is a horse”), otherwise known as Fregean Thoughts. In the Fregean sense, to possess the concept *horse* is to grasp a Thought with the concept *horse* as a constituent. “Grasping” such a Thought may

be glossed thus: believing that p, where “p” is replaced by any sentence whose sense has the concept *horse* as a constituent.¹

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

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

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

1.2 Content

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

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

A visual perceptual experience enjoyed by someone sitting at a desk may represent various writing implements and items of furniture as having particular spatial relations to one another and to the experiencer, and as themselves as having various qualities. . . . The representational content of a perceptual experience has to be given by a propo-

sition, or set of propositions, which specifies the way the experience represents the world to be. (Peacocke, 1983, p. 5)³

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

1.3 State conceptualism

Sometimes the notion of non-conceptual content is introduced along the following lines:

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

where the concept *F* characterizes the proposition *p* iff $p = \text{that} \dots F \dots$ ⁴ If *M* does not have non-conceptual content, then it has *conceptual* content: anyone who is in *M* must possess all the concepts that characterize *p* (compare Crane, 1992, p. 143; Martin, 1992, p. 238; Tye, 1995, p. 139).

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

If the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction is explained in this fashion, it is much better to take it as applying to *states*, not to *contents*.⁵ Putting the distinction more hygienically: state *M* with content *p* is a *non-conceptual state* iff it is possible to be in *M* without possessing all the concepts that characterize *p*.

1.4 Content conceptualism⁶

On another way of explaining the conceptual/non-conceptual distinction, the phrase “non-conceptual content” isn't at all misleading, because non-conceptual content really is a special kind of content. In the first instance it is explained negatively: non-conceptual content is *not* conceptual content, where the latter is characterized either as belief content, or as content with concepts in the Fregean sense as constituents.⁷

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

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

As noted, the main players in the debate hold that the contents of belief are Fregean Thoughts. So for them, the characterization of conceptual content as belief content,

and the characterization of it as Fregean content, are equivalent. But since it is not assumed here that belief content is Fregean, we need to choose one of these characterizations. Section 1.1 announced that “concept” will be used in the pleonastic sense, and this was partly in anticipation of Brewer’s stipulation (this volume, p. 229–30, n. 5) that conceptual content is *belief content*; given this stipulation, it is a substantive question whether conceptual content is also Fregean. Sometimes the stipulation is the reverse. Stalnaker (1998a) defends the view that the content of both belief and perception is “non-conceptual,” by which he means (at least) that it is not composed of Fregean concepts; in the (perhaps not ideal) terminology of this essay, Stalnaker’s view is content *conceptualism*.

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

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

1.5 The relation between state and content conceptualism

State and content conceptualism (or non-conceptualism) are sometimes conflated; at any rate they are frequently not properly distinguished.⁸ What is the relation between the two views?

Suppose that (total) *content non-conceptualism* is true: if perceptual state *M* has content *p*, *p* is non-conceptual. So *p* ≠ that *s* (for any sentence replacing “*s*”), and hence *p* is not characterized by *any* concepts. It trivially follows that anyone who is in *M* must possess all the concepts that characterize *p*, and thus (according to the explanation in section 1.3) that *M* is *conceptual*. So content non-conceptualism implies state conceptualism. But it is more natural to amend the account of section 1.3 by stipulating that as stated it only applies when *p* is characterized by some concepts, and adding that if *M* has *non-conceptual* content *q*, then *M* is a *non-conceptual* state. With this amendment adopted, content non-conceptualism entails state non-conceptualism; equivalently, state conceptualism entails content conceptualism. (This is of course not an exciting result, merely the consequence of a somewhat arbitrary stipulation.)

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

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

2 The Richness Argument and the Continuity Argument

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

2.1 The richness argument

The richness argument is present in embryo form in *The Varieties of Reference*.⁹ Heck elaborates it in this way:

Consider your current perceptual state – and now imagine what a complete description of the way the world appears to you at this moment might be like. Surely a thousand words would hardly begin to do the job. . . . Before me now, for example, are arranged various objects with various shapes and colors, of which, it might seem, I have no concept. My desk exhibits a whole host of shades of brown, for which I have no names. . . . Yet my experience of these things represents them far more precisely than that, far more distinctively, it would seem, than any other characterization I could hope to formulate, for myself or for others, in terms of the concepts I presently possess. The problem is not lack of time, but lack of descriptive resources, that is, lack of the appropriate concepts. (Heck, 2000, pp. 489–90)

The conclusion of this argument is non-conceptualism: “the content of perceptual states is different in kind from that of cognitive states like belief” (ibid., p. 485).

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

Argument H

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

Hence:

C1 p is not *conceptual*; in particular, it is not the proposition that the desk is brown₁₇.
That is, non-conceptualism is true.

But C1 does not follow from P1. Assume, as Heck does, that the contents of beliefs are Thoughts. Then *one* possibility consistent with P1 is that p is (say) the possible worlds proposition that is modally equivalent to (but distinct from) the Thought that the desk is brown₁₇. But *another* possibility consistent with P1 is that p is simply the Thought that the desk is brown₁₇.¹⁰

2.2 The continuity argument

The continuity argument is also present in embryo form in *Varieties* (Evans, 1982, p. 124). Here is Peacocke's version:

Nonconceptual content has been recruited for many purposes. In my view the most fundamental reason – the one on which other reasons must rely if the conceptualist presses hard – lies in the need to describe correctly the overlap between human perception and that of some of the nonlinguistic animals. While being reluctant to attribute concepts to the lower animals, many of us would also want to insist that the property of (say) representing a flat brown surface as being at a certain distance from one can be common to the perceptions of humans and of lower animals. The overlap of content is not just a matter of analogy, of mere quasi-subjectivity in the animal case. It is literally the same representational property that the two experiences possess, even if the human experience also has richer representational contents in addition. If the lower animals do not have states with conceptual content, but some of their perceptual states have contents in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual. (Peacocke, 2001b, pp. 613–14)¹¹

This argument may be set out as follows:

Argument P

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

Hence:

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

P2 Some of the perceptual states of lower animals have contents in common with human perceptual states.¹²

Hence (from C1, P2):

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

P1 may be restated like this:

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

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

An additional problem with the argument is the tension between P1 and P2. According to P1, the lower animals are radically unlike us cognitively: they neither know, think, nor believe that this surface is brown. According to P2, the lower animals are importantly like us perceptually: the surface can appear to some of them *exactly* as it appears to some of us. Now Peacocke does not deny that the lower animals are in states *somewhat* like beliefs – “proto-beliefs,” say. And if proto-beliefs are available to the theorist of animal minds, presumably so are “proto-perceptions,” which do not overlap in content with genuine perceptions. If the lower animals merely proto-believe, why don’t they merely proto-perceive?

3 Epistemological Defenses of Conceptualism

According to one traditional account of perception, it consists in the passive receipt of sensations (the Given), which then justify certain judgments – that an orange triangle is before one, for instance. In *Mind and World*, McDowell (1994, p. 7) distills the idea of the Given thus: “the space of reason, the space of justification or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere.” This is unacceptable, according to McDowell, because it cannot explain how “experience [can] count as a reason for holding a belief” (ibid., p. 14). “We cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a *judgment* is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification” (ibid., p. 7).¹³ Non-conceptualism is a version of “the Myth of the Given” (ibid., p. 51).

Brewer’s *Perception and Reason* develops and extends McDowell’s epistemic complaint against non-conceptualism. Brewer’s basic argument is succinctly stated:

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

(CC) Sense experiential states have conceptual content (this volume, p. 218).

McDowell’s argument can be similarly outlined.

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

3.1 Reasons

Someone might have a reason to believe that it will rain soon, for example. What sort of things *are* reasons (for belief)?¹⁴ One common and well motivated answer is “propositions”: that there are storm clouds on the horizon could be someone’s reason to believe that it will rain soon, and so on (see Unger, 1975, pp. 200–6; Williamson, 2000, pp. 194–200; Thomson, 2001, pp. 22–6). McDowell uses the terminology of “reasons” informally, Brewer less so. Although Brewer never explicitly says that reasons are propositions, he comes close enough: “giving reasons involves identifying certain relevant propositions – those contents which figure as the premises and conclusions of inferences explicitly articulating the reasoning involved” (this volume, p. 219). Reasons, we may say, are propositions. (Perhaps some propositions – the false ones, for instance – are not reasons.) A subject *S* has various reasons p_1, p_2, \dots ; if *S* has reason *p*, then that is a reason for *S* to believe some proposition *q*. Typically different reasons are reasons to believe different propositions: *S* might have reason p_1 to believe q_1 , and reason p_2 to believe q_2 , yet not have reason p_1 to believe q_2 .

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

Some regimentation of terminology is required. Let us distinguish:

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

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

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

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

One other piece of jargon needs explaining:

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

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

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

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

3.2 An example

It will help to have a simple example of the sort of view that McDowell's and Brewer's arguments are intended to rule out. Pretend (solely for the sake of illustration) that the content of belief is Russellian, and imagine a non-conceptualist who holds in addition that the content of perception is Lewisian/Stalnakerian. Suppose a certain blue book *o* looks blue to S. According to our non-conceptualist, the content of S's experience is the possible worlds proposition that is true at a world *w* just in case *o* is blue in *w*, which we can take to be the set of worlds $\{w \mid o \text{ is blue in } w\}$. If S endorses the content of his experience, he will make a judgment with the content that *o* is blue, which we can take to be the ordered pair $\langle o, \text{blueness} \rangle$. As Evans (1982, p. 227) says, this "process of conceptualization or *judgment* takes the subject from his being in one kind of informational state (with content of a certain kind, namely non-conceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content)." The Russellian singular proposition $\langle o, \text{blueness} \rangle$ is, of course, modally equivalent to the possible worlds proposition $\{w \mid o \text{ is blue in } w\}$ that the non-conceptualist claims is the content of S's experience. We may suppose that our non-conceptualist agrees with Brewer's first premise ("Sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs"): she holds that perceptual states, although they have non-conceptual content, supply (conceptual) reasons for belief. Further suppose – in what amounts to a concession to Brewer and McDowell – that our non-conceptualist endorses a very strong reading of Brewer's first premise. She holds that perceptual states are *intrinsic* suppliers of reasons – they do not supply reasons only when other contingent conditions obtain. In particular, our non-conceptualist affirms:

(*) Necessarily, if *o* looks blue to S, then S is in a position to have a reason to believe that *o* is blue.¹⁵

Let us now examine whether our non-conceptualist can fend off McDowell's and Brewer's arguments.

3.3 McDowell

Mind and World contains a number of rather compressed objections against non-conceptualism.¹⁶ One is this:

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

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

But *our* non-conceptualist accepts that *all* reasons, whether articulable or not, are within the space of concepts. So, whatever McDowell's complaint is, it cannot be put in the terminology of this essay by saying that, according to the non-conceptualist, reasons are not conceptual.

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

Argument M1

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

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

Suppose that S in the example of section 3.2 goes on to form the belief that *o* is blue. What is S's reason for believing this? McDowell (1994, p. 165) continues:

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

This suggests that S's reason to believe that *o* is blue is the psychological proposition that *o* looks blue (to S).¹⁷ And of course this is superficially attractive. So this gives us the second premise:

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

Hence (from P1, P2):

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

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

A paragraph later McDowell apparently introduces a new consideration:

The routine point is really no more than that there can be rational relations between its being the case that P and its being the case that Q (in a limiting case what replaces "Q" can simply be what replaces "P"). It does not follow that something whose content is given by the fact that it has correctness condition that P can *eo ipso* be someone's reason for, say, judging that Q, independently of whether the content is conceptual or not. We can bring into view the rational relations between the contents... only by comprehending the putatively grounding content in conceptual terms, even if our theory is that the item that has that content does not do its representing in a conceptual way. A theory like Peacocke's does not credit ordinary subjects with this comprehensive view of the two contents, and I think that leaves it unintelligible how an item with the non-conceptual content that P can be someone's reason for judging that Q. (Ibid., p. 166, note omitted)¹⁸

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

Argument M2

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

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

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

C1 S's perceptual state has conceptual content.

Our non-conceptualist is about as well placed as the conceptualist to accommodate P1. If S's perceptual state is a "mere sensation," then it certainly seems puzzling how it might supply a reason to believe that *o* is blue, as opposed to, say, that *o* is red, or that some other object *o** is square, or whatever (see Steup, 2001; Pryor, this volume). However, our non-conceptualist, like the conceptualist, denies that S's perceptual state is a mere sensation: it has content, and moreover content that *strictly implies* that *o* is blue. So the non-conceptualist's position that S's perceptual state supplies a reason

that is *not* the content of the state seems perfectly defensible, which is to say that P2 is quite doubtful.

3.4 Brewer

We have assumed that McDowell is a *content* conceptualist (see the quotation above in section 1.4). In fact, this attribution is somewhat problematic, because content conceptualism does not appear to be equivalent to McDowell's other characterizations of his view.¹⁹ Matters are clearer with Brewer: "[A] *conceptual state* – that is to say, a mental state with *conceptual content* – is one whose content is the content of a possible *judgment by the subject*" (this volume, p. 217). So Brewer's slogan that "sense experiential states have conceptual content" implies that they have content of the sort that can be believed (or judged), and so implies content conceptualism. Hence, whatever else Brewer wants to add (see the sentence in his essay immediately following the one just quoted), for present purposes we can take this to be the conclusion of his argument.

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

As we saw in the previous section, there is some indication that McDowell takes it to be the proposition that *o* looks blue (to S). Brewer, however, thinks otherwise. Generalized, the view that S's reason for believing that *o* is blue is that *o* looks blue (to S) amounts to this: one's perception-based knowledge of one's environment rests on a foundational layer of reasons concerning one's psychology. As Brewer argues at length in *Perception and Reason* (chapter 4; see also this volume, pp. 227–8), this "second-order view" is a disastrous model of perceptual knowledge, not least because it tacitly presumes a dubious account of self-knowledge. Of course, Brewer does not deny that that propositions about how things appear are sometimes among one's reasons for believing propositions about one's environment: for instance, if a certain book looks dark blue, that might be a reason for believing that the illuminant is a tungsten bulb, rather than a fluorescent one. And presumably the proposition that an object looks blue is often *among* the reasons one has to believe that it is blue. But this reason is not particularly important – typically one does not need to have it in order to know that an object is blue.²⁰

The proposition that *o* looks blue to S having been excluded, there is only one remaining candidate for the proposition that is S's reason (or, at least, S's important reason): the proposition that *o* is blue. So we may take Brewer to hold that this proposition is S's reason for believing that *o* is blue. How do we get from this to the desired conclusion, namely that the non-conceptualist is mistaken, because the content of S's experience is the proposition that *o* is blue?

These must be the subject's *own* reasons, which figure as such *from his point of view*. It follows from this, first, that the subject's having such a reason consists in his being in some mental state or other, although this may be essentially factive. For any actually motivating reason *for the subject* must at the very least register at the personal level in this way. Second, it also follows that it cannot be the case that the proposition, reference to which is required . . . in characterizing the reason in question, can merely be

related to the mental state of the subject's *indirectly*, by the theorist in some way. Rather, it must actually be the content of his mental state in a sense which requires that the subject has all of its constituent concepts. Otherwise . . . it cannot constitute his *own reason*. [Thus, sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs only if they have conceptual content]. (Brewer, 1999, p. 152, note omitted; square bracketed quotation from this volume, p. 219)

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

Argument B1

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

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

Hence (from P1, P2):

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

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

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

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

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

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

Argument B2

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

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

Hence (from P1, P2):

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

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

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

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

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

So far we have assumed that Brewer's insistence that "sense experiential states provide reasons . . . [that are] the subject's *own* reasons, which figure as such *from her point of view*" (this volume, p. 219) is accommodated by the claim (in our terminology) that perception *supplies* reasons. That is (again in our terminology), perception puts the subject in a position to *have* reasons. Unfortunately that is not quite right.

One reason for suspecting that Brewer has something more in mind is the presence in the above quotation of the phrase "as such." And later he writes that his argument "rests upon the requirement that reasons for the subject, must be recognizable as such, and susceptible to rational scrutiny and evaluation *by her*" (this volume, p. 227). Brewer labels this the "recognition requirement" (see also Brewer, 1999, p. 19, n. 2). It should bring to mind McDowell's demand that a subject should be able to "articulate" her reasons, and indeed Brewer views the recognition requirement as one way of developing McDowell's point (*ibid.*, p. 163).

The just-quoted statement of the recognition requirement suggests that if a subject has reason *p* to believe *q*, she must be able to recognize this fact. If so, the recognition requirement is basically a non-linguistic version of P1 in Argument M1 (to get something approximating to the recognition requirement, replace P1's "to knowingly assert" with "to recognize").²¹

However, we have already seen that McDowell's "articulation requirement" seems to be of little help in deriving conceptualism. If the recognition requirement is just a weaker version of the articulation requirement, then it will be no more helpful. And, in any case, this version of the recognition requirement is very implausible.²²

However, on closer examination the recognition requirement appears to be something quite different. In *Perception and Reason* Brewer notes the distinction between "a person's simply making a transition [in thought] in a way which happens to accord with the relevant norms and her being guided by such norms in what she does" (*ibid.*, p. 165). In our terminology this is more-or-less the distinction between: (a) believing *q*, *having* reason *p* to believe *q*, but not believing *q* *for* the reason *p*; and (b) believing *q* *for* the reason *p*. A specific example of each was given in section 3.1.

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

it is central to this distinction, between action in accord with a rule and genuine rule-following, that in the latter case [the subject] is guided in making the transition by recognition of her reason *as a reason for doing so*. . . . In other words the condition which forms the starting point of the present line of argument does indeed obtain [i.e. the recog-

dition requirement is true]: genuinely reason-giving explanations cite reasons which in some sense are necessarily recognized as such by the subject. (Ibid., p. 166)

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

4 Do Experiences Have Conceptual Content?

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

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

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

the content one started thinking *with*, in which case no sensible conclusion can be that the content is non-conceptual.

For one more objection, recall the distinction made in section 1.4 between *total* and *partial* non-conceptualism. To simplify matters, the discussion so far assumed that the dispute was between the total conceptualist and the total non-conceptualist. But is total *non*-conceptualism at all plausible? Imagine some very basic case of seeing that *p*, where one would say without any reservation that the proposition that *p* specifies, at least in part, how things visually strike one: seeing that *o* is blue, for example. Given the rather abbreviated way in which the notion of perceptual content is usually introduced, we lack any grip on what it would mean to *deny* that the proposition that *o* is blue is part of the content of one's experience.²³

Is the *partial* non-conceptualist any better off? She might well agree that when one *sees that o* is blue, that proposition is always part of the content of one's experience (cf. Peacocke, 1992, p. 88). But she must hold that *some* experiences have exclusively non-conceptual content (say, in the example of section 3.2, the possible worlds proposition {*w* | *o* is blue in *w*}). We may suppose the partial non-conceptualist claims that when *o* looks blue to *S*, but he does not see that *o* is blue (perhaps because *o* isn't blue), the content of *S*'s experience is exclusively non-conceptual. However, the retreat to partial non-conceptualism does not help. We are told that: (a) the content of experience captures the way things perceptually appear to the subject; (b) when *S* sees that *o* is blue the content of his experience includes the proposition that *o* is blue; and (c) when *o* looks blue to *S* this proposition is not part of the content of his experience. But, surely, in case (b) and (c) things appear the same way to *S*, which conflicts with (a).²⁴

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

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

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

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

One might try to support (*) by contemplating a counterfactual situation in which absolutely nothing has any color, and yet objects look colored to *S*; in particular, *o* looks blue to *S*. It is often claimed that in any such situation *S* is in a position to have a reason to believe that *o* is blue. However, this is arguably an overreaction to the fact that it would be perfectly understandable for *S* to believe that *o* is blue – *S*

would be *epistemically blameless* for having this belief. (For some relevant discussion, see Pryor, 2001, pp. 114–18; Sutton, forthcoming.)

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

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

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

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

It must be emphasized that interesting instances of (***) are not being attributed to either Brewer or McDowell.²⁵ But if none is correct, then there is no true and exciting interpretation of the slogan that started this essay. In fact, it is more economical to reserve the slogan for a substantive epistemological claim. And if we do, the moral is this: experiences have conceptual content; yet, while we often know things by perception, experiences do not justify beliefs.²⁶

Notes

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

- 2 Because concepts are supposed to correspond to categories, the allowable substituends for “F” are always restricted, although the restriction is rarely made explicit. The nature of the restriction can be left open here.
- 3 Peacocke (1983) assumes that the content of experience is conceptual. In later work defending the opposite view, Peacocke does not describe the content of experience as propositional (see the first paragraph in this section).
- 4 The allowable substituends for “F” should be taken from Enriched English, containing all concept expressions that *could be* introduced into English (including, for example, possible adjectives for highly determinate shades of color like “brown₂₆,” “brown₁₇,” etc.). Similarly for “s” in section 1.5 below.
- 5 Note that as applied to contents, the distinction is not even guaranteed to be exclusive. Suppose M has non-conceptual content p, and that the content p could be believed (that is, there is such a mental state as the belief p). Then, because the belief p automatically “has conceptual content p,” p will be both “conceptual” and “non-conceptual.”
- 6 The useful “state/content” terminology is borrowed from Heck (2000, pp. 484–5).
- 7 Some theorists, notably Peacocke, go on to give a positive characterization. According to Peacocke, the non-conceptual content of experience is a combination of “scenario content” and “protopositional content.” These abstract objects are built to Russellian specifications: a protopositional content is a simple sort of Russellian proposition, while a scenario content is something more complicated, but likewise constructed from materials at the level of reference (Peacocke, 1992, chapter 3). See also Evans (1982, pp. 124–9).
- 8 As Stalnaker (1998a, b) points out, examples of conflation between state and content (non-)conceptualism are neatly dissected in Speaks (2003).
- 9 See Evans (1982, pp. 229 and 125, n. 9). A related argument is in Dretske (1981, chapter 6); however, plainly Dretske is arguing for something like *state* non-conceptualism.
- 10 See Byrne (1996, p. 264, n. 6). The richness argument is opposed by McDowell (1994, pp. 56–60, 1998) and Brewer (1999, pp. 170–4) on the ground that demonstratives like “that shade” can capture the content of color experience (see also Kelly, 2001). However, McDowell and Brewer appear to concede that the argument provides a *prima facie* consideration in favor of (content) non-conceptualism.
- 11 Cf. Bermúdez (1998, chapters 3 and 4), McGinn (1989, p. 62). McDowell (1994, p. 64) in effect denies P2; see also Brewer (1999, pp. 177–9).
- 12 The “lower animals” include cats and dogs, and perhaps monkeys and apes (Peacocke, 2001a, p. 260).
- 13 An appropriate ending for this sentence would be “which hold between conceptual contents.” In fact, the sentence ends: “which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities.” See note 19 below.
- 14 Brewer (e.g. 1999, p. 150) sensibly holds that reasons for belief and reasons for action are similar sorts of thing. The latter will not be discussed here.
- 15 Perhaps S would not be “in a position to . . .” unless he possessed the concept *blue*; if so, add that he does.
- 16 Apart from Brewer (1999), other important discussions of McDowell’s arguments include Heck (2000, pp. 511–20) and Peacocke (2001a, pp. 255–6).
- 17 As McDowell exegesis, this is wrong (see note 19 below); but it is instructive to proceed as if it were right.
- 18 This quotation is rather loosely expressed, which might be partly responsible for McDowell’s allegation of unintelligibility. McDowell’s “P” and “Q” are schematic *sentence* letters. Any instance of McDowell’s last schematic sentence will have a declarative sentence in place of “P.” For instance: “. . . that leaves it unintelligible how an item with the non-conceptual content that *o* is blue can be someone’s reason . . .” But, as noted earlier

- in section 1.4, sentences (e.g. “the book is blue”) express conceptual contents. In other words, there is no such thing as “the non-conceptual content that *o* is blue.” A more precise reworking of McDowell’s last sentence would be: “. . . leaves it unintelligible how an item with the non-conceptual content *p* can be someone’s reason for judging *q*.” Here the schematic letter “*p*” may be replaced by a singular term (perhaps a description) referring to a particular nonconceptual content – for instance, in our simple example, “{*w* | *o* is blue in *w*}” – and “*q*” may be replaced by a “that-clause” – for instance, “that *o* is blue.”
- 19 His more usual style of explanation in terms of “capacities”: “It is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking. . . . When I say the content of experience is conceptual, that is what I mean by ‘conceptual’” (McDowell, 1994, p. 47). But the connection between capacities and content is unclear (cf. Stalnaker, 1998a, pp. 105–6).
 - 20 And McDowell (1995) agrees; see also Heck (2000, pp. 516–19). The answer “Because it looks blue” to the question “How do you know it is blue?” is appropriate because it gives the *source* of one’s reasons, rather than a statement of them (see Byrne, 2004).
 - 21 See also this volume, pp. 228–9, where a non-conceptualist attempts to meet the recognition requirement by formulating an argument with the conclusion “I have a reason to believe that *p*.”
 - 22 In the first place, both everyday life and empirical psychology indicate that subjects are often poor at recognizing their reasons. In the second place, the recognition requirement as stated is objectionable on more philosophical grounds (see especially Williamson, 2000, chapter 8).
 - 23 One example of an explanation of perceptual content is the quotation from Peacocke in section 1.2; another is in Harman (1990, p. 264).
 - 24 Stalnaker (1998a) and Speaks (2003) provide other reasons for content conceptualism (although they wouldn’t put the conclusion that way).
 - 25 For Brewer’s sophisticated and complex account of the sense in which experiences justify beliefs, see Brewer (1999, chapter 6), and the helpful discussion in Martin (2001).
 - 26 Many thanks to Jim Pryor, Susanna Siegel, Robert Stalnaker, and Matthias Steup; portions of sections 1 and 2 are adapted from Byrne (2002/3).

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