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Do We Have To Choose between Conceptualism and Non-Conceptualism?

Corijn Van Mazijk

Abstract

It is today acknowledged by many that the debate about non-conceptual content is a mess. Over the past decades a vast collection of arguments for non-conceptual content piled up in which a variety of conceptions of what determines a state's content is being used. This resulted in a number of influential attempts to clarify what would make a content non-conceptual, most notably Bermúdez's classic definition, Heck's divide into 'state' and 'content' (non-)conceptualism and Speaks's 'absolute' and 'relative' non-conceptualism. However, these interpretations, I argue, like the majority of non-conceptualist arguments, rest on a misconception of the conceptualist viewpoint. This has brought about an imbalance of the conceptualism/non-conceptualism dichotomy that has not been properly brought into view. This paper proceeds as follows: I first outline the central tenets of the conceptualist doctrine. Subsequently, I show that most of the main arguments of the past decades for non-conceptual content have little to no bearing on conceptualism. Third, I reveal that the definitions of Bermúdez, Heck and Speaks are unsuited to accommodate this asymmetry. Lastly, I claim that only a pluralistic understanding of these debates can reset the balance between conceptualism and non-conceptualism.

Keywords: non-conceptual content; conceptualism; non-conceptualism; experience; perceptual content; John McDowell

1. Introduction

The debate over non-conceptual content is complicated. For the past thirty years, philosophers have tried to straighten out what the conditions are of a content's being non-conceptual. Although the problem has its historical sources, most notably in Kant's critical philosophy, contemporary discussions mostly kicked off with Evans's (1982) *Varieties of Reference*, which presents us with among others the famous fineness of grain argument for non-conceptual content. In the following decade, the notion was further popularized and defended by Cussins (1990), Crane (1992), Peacocke (1992), Bermúdez (1994, 1995), Dretske (1995) and Tye (1996).

With the dawn of the twenty-first century, philosophers started to realize that a simple divide between conceptual and non-conceptual content could not adequately account for the wide scale of positions that had been developed up to then. The attempts that followed to structure the mess which had gradually evolved typically focused on distinguishing types and/or degrees of non-conceptual content. Heck (2000) famously distinguished ‘state’ and ‘content’ non-conceptualism, which seems to have influenced Speaks’s (2005) equally well-known divide into ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ non-conceptual content. Whereas these debates mostly maintain a paradigmatic focus on perceptual experience, a number of philosophers of mind have more recently started to focus on embodied aspects of our dealings with the world. Dreyfus (2013) and Schear (2013), inspired by the phenomenological writings of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, argue that skillful copings and unreflective bodily actions do not involve the actualization of concepts. Other phenomenologically inspired cases include Crane (2013), who appeals to Husserl’s (1984) idea of real (*reellen*) content in *Logical Investigations* to support a new kind of non-conceptual content hitherto overlooked.

It is a remarkable fact that the number of anti-conceptualists has throughout these debates by far exceeded the number of conceptualists. In fact, it would seem that hardly a handful of influential conceptualist accounts has seen the light of day, of which McDowell’s is by far the most important.¹ This contrasts with a great diversity of psychological, transcendental and phenomenological arguments that have been aimed against McDowell. One who is new to these debates would probably suspect that either conceptualism is indeed implausible, or it has to be something other than all these non-conceptualists take it to be.

This paper is a defense of the second interpretation. Misappropriations of the conceptualist thesis – especially in the light of psychology and phenomenology – have resulted in an imbalance of the dichotomy of non-conceptualism and conceptualism that has thus far not been properly brought into view. I start out by outlining the basic thesis conceptualists endorse. I then show that the most important arguments for non-conceptual content that have been aimed against McDowell in fact have little to no bearing on conceptualism. Third, I reveal that recent attempts to make more fine-grained distinctions in degrees or kinds of non-conceptual content cannot make this situation comprehensible. I conclude that the only way to save our talk about non-conceptual and conceptual contents is by distinguishing between different issues that are at stake in these debates, which means adopting a new kind of pluralistic approach to debates about non-conceptual content.

2. Epistemic Conceptualism

McDowell’s conceptualist thesis is an important but also frequently misunderstood philosophical theory. I do not aim to give a complete overview of

McDowell's work in this section. I will, however, try to stay close to the idea of conceptualism and explain what I take it to entail. I will expand upon three ways McDowell has talked about conceptualism, the first of which departs from Kant, the second from Descartes, and the third from Wittgenstein. All three challenge the legitimacy of a prevalent image of the mind/world-relationship and a dilemma that is taken to follow from it. As it will turn out, the main features highlighted here are not the ones non-conceptualists have directed their arguments against (section 3).

As is well known, McDowell's *Mind and World* sets the stage with a diagnosis of a 'state of oscillation' said to be typical of Modern philosophy (see McDowell, 1994, pp. 8–9). Philosophers like Locke, Hume and Kant conceived of sense data as the ultimate constituents of the mind's contents. On Locke's empiricist account, the complex thoughts we entertain are made up of more basic ones which, at bottom, derive from sensations received from the external world (see Locke 1825). This picture implies the existence of a point where mind and world meet. Sensations stand at this shared boundary: they translate the givens of the natural world into the language of the mind. It is this idea of translation which many twentieth-century philosophers in both the analytic and continental tradition have deemed implausible. In McDowell's case, this resistance is conducted via the works of Sellars.

On Sellars's account, the empiricist picture betrays a commitment to the 'Myth of the Given'; it grants sensations both a foothold in thought and in physical reality. Although this picture might well have an intuitive appeal on anyone interested in a natural story about the relations between body and world, the myth comes into play once we commit to a kind of dual image of explanation. Sellars (1962, 1963) articulated this in terms of the scientific and manifest image and also as the space of reasons and of nature. On his understanding, which McDowell straightforwardly adopts, we should beware of conflating two distinct explanatory frameworks. The space of nature, broadly that of causal-scientific explanation, should not be taken to have a direct bearing upon the space of reasons – that of beliefs, desires and whatever subjective feelings a person may have. One thus commits to the myth when one holds the conjunction of a dual image with the idea that bare sense data give rational subjects reasons for believing something to be the case.

The resistance against the myth has resulted, as Sellars knew already, in a rising popularity of coherentist theories of justification. This is what McDowell takes to be at the other end of the state of oscillation. Once we recognize that sensations cannot be invoked to function like hinges between beliefs and external reality, we are tempted to drop the idea of our beliefs being in touch with reality altogether. McDowell's main concern with coherentism seems to be that it has both an internalistic ring to it: it 'suggests images within the sphere of thinking' (McDowell, 1994, p. 15). McDowell thinks that if experience is only a matter of sensations causally enabling our capacity to exercise conceptual capacities, then the whole idea of conceptual capacities itself is rendered

problematic. His favoring of Kant is partially due to the fact that the latter maintains the applicability of the products of the understanding onto the products of sensibility. Although coherentism is not incompatible with this image of cooperation, its downplay of the receptive faculty to causality is not particularly predisposed to it either. McDowell's anti-coherentism stems from the desire to give back to experience what was taken from it.

The dilemma has now loosely been set: either we commit to a Given, or we lose the idea of thought-exercises onto a world of experience. Neither of these options seems very appealing. Conceptualism is supposed to be the solution to this oscillatory state. I just pointed out that McDowell thinks Kant's transcendental framework, which is based on the fundamental distinction between sensibility or receptivity (which produces intuitions) and the understanding (productive of concepts), is useful in that it takes experience to be conditioned by a cooperation of these two stems of knowledge. A second, more contentious point McDowell favors him for is that for Kant the having of intuitions itself is made possible through the exercise of concepts.²

This reading has been the cause of a new wave of Kantian non-conceptualists over the past years. I have defended a more or less McDowellian reading of Kant's philosophy elsewhere (see Van Mazijk, 2014b).³ For McDowell, Kant's remark that intuitions without concepts are blind⁴ does not point to an actual type of intuition that would be blind. This is not to say that intuitions should necessarily pair with an act of spontaneity on explicit command of the subject, nor does it imply a denial of the differences between intuition and thought both in respect of their phenomenology and justificatory roles. Rather, it suggests that intuitions 'are rationally integrated into spontaneity in their own way' (McDowell 1994, p. 58), one which, it is said, minimally requires an openness to reflection.

In *Mind and World*, explanations of how intuition would get its conceptual content without losing its *sui generis* nature are limited to remarks on *Bildung* and 'second nature'.⁵ The cultural development of humans is said to bring about a kind of 'habitualization' (to borrow a term from Husserlian phenomenology) of rationality that comes to pervade our everyday dealings with the world. A rational agent's experiential contents become in a (non-Platonic) sense non-natural, insofar as they form a space of reasons or second nature that is distinct from that of first nature. For a rational being, this conceptual sphere does not demand being activated willingly; plain perception of the world is already invested with it.

A second path to conceptualism departs from Descartes (see McDowell, 1986).⁶ McDowell does not believe that the oscillatory state can be overcome simply by relocating the pieces of the puzzle. The problem is that the puzzle itself is ill-conceived. In its widest sense, this philosophical misconception is perhaps adequately covered by the old philosophical expression *veritas est adequatio rei et intellectus*.⁷ Correspondence theory rests on the assumption that mind and world are distinct realms whose entities can come to agreement

in truth. This view has, especially since Modernity, been taken to involve an inner realm which stands over against a natural reality that is the desired target of knowledge.

It is not just skeptical doubt but also the related discovery of an apodictically knowable inner realm that led Descartes to transform this view into a rather problematic relation between a self-contained autonomous mind and a world external to it. McDowell contests that this last move is necessary: he denies that we have to think of the newly recognized realm of certainty as giving us the whole story about reasons and knowledge (McDowell, 1986, p. 150). The Cartesian picture claims that there are no facts about the inner realm besides what is infallibly given. But there is no reason, McDowell says, to restrict the sphere of knowledge to that of inner certainty. If we conceive of perception as relating directly to external objects, then the space of reasons can be extended beyond the Cartesian inner realm: it may ‘incorporate [...] the relevant portions of the “external” world’ (McDowell, 1986, p. 167). Again, McDowell’s aim is to reconnect experience with the world without distancing it from *res cogitans*, in order to bring the world back into view of rational justification. The conceptual content of intuition constitutes the missing link in this story: it allows us to conceive of the intricate connectedness of thought and fact, thereby securing thought’s bearing onto the world where the internalist image disconnects both.⁸

The third historical passage I will briefly discuss here departs from Wittgenstein’s fragments on private language. In *Mind and World*, McDowell (1994, p. 19) basically interprets the private language argument as a rejection of the Myth of the Given. If sense data are in the empiricist sense the foundational elements of knowledge, then there have to be some kind of basic concepts operative at the ground level which are entirely private. In a later essay (McDowell, 1998a), McDowell explains why for Wittgenstein a bare presence of something outside of the network of rational capacities cannot deliver a justificatory input. Private sensations, he claims, are not first pre-conceptually given and then somehow transformed into something understandable. Rather, a sensation itself is ‘in place here *only because* the experience involves a concept (*pain*, say, or *toothache*)’ (McDowell, 1998a, p. 284). This is what Wittgenstein would have in mind when he says that ‘the thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*’ (Wittgenstein, 1986, s. 293).

On this picture, there is nothing simple to which the subject relates which would bridge its beliefs to an outer reality. But neither does there have to be, for there is no gap to be bridged between world and subject. It is often overlooked that this ontological commitment does not force the conceptualist to deny that a notion of non-conceptual content or sensations might be of use to other explanatory fields, for instance to cognitive psychology (McDowell, 1994, p. 55). It is only in the light of reasons that the order between bare givens and exercised rationality (and more radically their relation altogether) ought to be rejected.

The three ways discussed lead to an image of conceptualism that might be expressed as something like a content externalist reply to the Modern internalist picture of the mind from which both ends of the oscillatory state are taken to follow.⁹ It is important, however, to further specify what precisely it entails for a conceptualist that experience has conceptual content. It should be noted that McDowell's later position differs from his earlier one in various respects, and that he has now dropped the claim that everything intuition allows one to judge needs to be contained in that intuition's content. This means that the perceptual content of a cardinal bird does not involve the concept of cardinal (see McDowell, 2009, pp. 261). Although this is a significant departure, it does not mean that McDowell now believes no concepts at all are involved in the perceptual content. Furthermore, I think it would be a mistake to assume that concerns about which concepts or conceptual capacities would play a role in experience and which do not have ever been of central concern to conceptualism. Rather, it is experience's *openness to reason* that throughout has taken central stage in the conceptualism doctrine. We find this clearly expressed in a number of fragments:

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, my italics)

An intuition's content is all conceptual, in this sense: it is in the intuition in a form in which one *could* make it, that very content, figure in discursive activity. (McDowell, 2009, p. 265)

[This] is what it means for capacities to be conceptual in the relevant sense: they are capacities whose content is of a form that fits it to figure in discursive activity. (McDowell, 2013, p. 42)

As with the Kantian, Cartesian and Wittgensteinean ways to conceptualism, the above three fragments express a distinctive theory of experience which I shall henceforth address as 'weak epistemic conceptualism'. According to weak epistemic conceptualism, experience has conceptual content because it belongs to the space of reasons, that is, it is *in principle* open to judgment. A content is conceptual if it belongs to the space of reasons, and non-conceptual if it does not. Although any variant of epistemic conceptualism may also involve an additional claim specifying the exact role of conceptual capacities in experience, I will proceed by focusing on weak epistemic conceptualism, which only demands that the contents of experience are open to judgment – which is the central claim defended by all conceptualists.

In the next section, I turn to a number of influential arguments for non-conceptual content in order to investigate whether they address this central conceptualist claim when rejecting McDowell's conceptualism.

3. Arguments for Non-Conceptualism

Fineness of Grain

The argument from the fineness of grain of perceptual experience is one of the best-represented arguments for non-conceptualism in current literature. It originates from Evans's (1982) non-conceptualist account in his *Varieties of Reference* which was published and edited by McDowell. The argument, as Evans puts it, is quite simple: introspection reveals to us that the contents of perception are too fine-grained to allow conceptualization and are therefore best considered non-conceptual. The argument is supposed to claim that the visual contents one might experience when looking at a pointillist painting by Signac, or the sounds one hears when listening to a Mozart divertimento are too detailed to be fully conceptualized. Heck (2000, p. 489) explains this point as follows:

My desk exhibits a whole host of shades of brown, for which I have no names. The speakers to the sides of my computer are not quite flat, but have curved faces; I could not begin to describe their shape in anything like adequate terms. The leaves on the trees outside my window are fluttering back and forth, randomly, as it seems to me, as the wind passes over them.

The point made is that it is hard to deny that perceptual discrimination of properties is far more accurate than their possible conscious identification. Because one cannot conceptually identify the complex contents of some or all perceptual experiences, the perceptual contents in case must be unconceptualizable and for that reason non-conceptual.

McDowell and others have responded extensively to this problem; I will try to avoid unnecessary details here (see McDowell, 1994, pp. 46–65). When Evans developed his argument for non-conceptual content, he based it on his 'Generality Constraint' (Evans, 1982, pp. 100–105). According to the Generality Constraint, a subject possesses a concept if s/he is able to use and understand it in different propositional structures. To possess the concept 'red', one should be able to use it in a number of different propositions, otherwise one does not truly possess it. Importantly, McDowell's notion of conceptual capacity in *Mind and World* is wider than this.¹⁰ The difference in case is more or less between a person's ability to (a) embrace an experience within thought and (b) that experience's linguistic expression. Whereas for Evans (a) and (b) amount to the same thing, McDowell considers (a) to encompass more than

(b). The understanding's extension into experience allows exploitation of the actual givenness of a state of affairs, as in saying 'that shade' (McDowell, 1994, p. 57). McDowell assures us that conceptual capacities are involved in such demonstrative reference, since it is possible to embrace the objective sense even after the intuition has faded.¹¹ If demonstrative reference involves conceptual capacities, one's experience of detailed paintings is equally within one's conceptual grasp.

McDowell's conception of demonstrative reference has witnessed some resistance. Kelly (2001) has objected to demonstrative concepts by adding the condition that concepts should be re-identifiable by the subject in different sets of circumstances. For a subject to possess a concept of a particular shade of red it should be possible for him/her to consistently identify a color patch of that color when held in comparison to other patches, say a blue and a green one. However, experiments show that if a shade of red is put next to other shades of red closely resembling it, the subject might not be able to correctly recognize it, from which it follows that the subject does not truly possess the relevant concept. I line up with Speaks (2005) here in questioning the validity of this argument. One's inability to recognize something over a course of changing settings does not suffice to deny that one is having a knowledgeable experience of something.¹² If a subject is capable of expressing his/her experience of an intuited color, then no external authority should have the right to deny that that subject is indeed having a rational experience.

Although the argument from fineness of grain clearly has something important to say about the nature of perception as opposed to thought, the psychological or phenomenological concern that perception has too detailed contents need not contradict the conceptualist claim: that that very content is already within the bounds of reasons. The fact that one can indeed never explicate all represented details of one's visual experience is irrelevant to this. To acknowledge this, it is important to differentiate between a content's being *essentially open* to conceptualization and it being an *actual possibility* to conceptualize it. The glimmering of an ocean surface at sunset admittedly has detail beyond one's capacity for conceptual explication. By saying 'how beautiful does that ocean surface glimmer' one nonetheless makes those details knowledgeable; one shows them to be essentially within one's conceptual grasp. Given that this is all weak epistemic conceptualism demands, there need be no disagreement between conceptualists and non-conceptualists concerning the fineness of grain of perception.

The Analogy of Non-Rational Animals

The analogy between human experiences and those of non-rational animals has been advanced as an argument against conceptualism by Bermúdez (1995), Peacocke (2001a, 2001b), Hanna (2008) and others. The argument makes an

intuitive appeal to our shared biological make-up with non-rational animals in order to establish the claim that we share some (parts) of our perceptual contents with lower animals. Given that some of these animals do not possess concepts, their perceptual contents, and consequently some (parts) of ours, would be non-conceptual. Peacocke (2001b, pp. 613–14) summarizes it as follows:

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 [...] 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 content in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual.

Peacocke's argument rests on the presupposition that we share some of our sub-personal representational contents with the lower animals, and that our richer contents complement them. This presupposition appears to be widely supported by natural facts. Given that humans, gibbons and macaques belong to the same superfamily and evolved from a common ancestor, it is at least likely that our perceptual hardwiring is much like theirs. Furthermore, since the conceptual capacities of these animals are incomparably more limited than ours, it makes sense to address parts of their perceptual contents as non-conceptual. This is, of course, an empirical matter which can be disputed, but McDowell would certainly agree that a macaque's space of reasons is severely limited. For that reason, some of its perceptions would have to have non-conceptual content at a predominantly sub-personal level. The established biological similarity is then able to bring about the conclusion that we too must have non-conceptual perceptual contents.

There are two answers a conceptualist may give to this analogy argument. One possible objection¹³ is that the analogy does not in fact establish a logically sound argument for non-conceptual content in human perception after all. There is nothing in the argument that determines that the contents of human perception would *not* be intrinsically different from those of non-rational animals. The logical possibility of our rationality having a pervading impact on the totality of our representational contents is not excluded. Although this is a legitimate objection, it is also a weak one, given the abundant empirical, psychological and phenomenological evidence for the existence of non-conceptual content at the level of sub-personal representation.

A second, stronger objection consists in claiming that the sorts of contents under discussion are altogether irrelevant to the conceptualist thesis. The conceptualist is interested in the relation between mind and world regarding

the structure of justification. Although sub-personal computational states in the naturalist sense discussed are indeed not open to rationalization, they also have no epistemic effect on the structure of justification. For the conceptualist, the analogy argument is a ‘recipe for trouble’, because it conflates the ‘respectable theoretical role non-conceptual content has in cognitive psychology [... with] the notion of content that belongs with the capacities exercised in active self-conscious thinking’ (McDowell, 1994, p. 55). The trouble is that, in *light of reasons*, the argument would suggest a ‘welling-up to the surface of some of the content that a good psychological theory would attribute to goings-on in our cognitive machinery’ – a problem left completely unaddressed by the analogy.

The Argument from Skillful Coping

Recent attempts to apply phenomenology to the conceptualism-debate have resulted in a number of distinctive arguments for non-conceptual content. According to Dreyfus (2013), phenomenological analyses by Heidegger (2012) and Merleau-Ponty (1966, 2005) reveal that our skillful, embodied copings with the world need not pair with reflective activity or conscious awareness. We all drink our coffee daily without thoughtfully calculating every movement. In fact, most of the time we are ‘absorbed’ in a world of practice without having explicit objects standing over against us. This by now fairly trivial point about our unreflective dealings with the world is taken by Dreyfus to prove the existence of a kind of non-conceptual content which conceptualism fails to incorporate. He argues that since conceptual activity demands a phenomenological distance between subject and object, and given that skillful copings lack such distance, the latter must have non-conceptual contents.

Although Dreyfus’s reflections are correct, the argument rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the conceptualist thesis. The fact that one can open a door without thinking about it does not entail that the very activity of opening a door cannot be conceptually explicated. There are perhaps cases of situated normativity, as in unreflectively taking an appropriate distance from others in an elevator, in which the relevant normative action falls entirely outside of one’s capacity for explication, simply because one has never reflected upon these kinds of actions before. However, even in such cases, a conceptualist can easily reply that there is no reason why the experience would *in principle* be closed off from explication. Furthermore, the conceptualist could legitimately maintain that the activity of distancing oneself in an elevator would have been fundamentally different if stripped from its normative significance, which indicates that rational capacities were essential to it after all.

Incongruent Counterparts

Hanna (2008) has pointed to an argument Kant developed in his pre-critical philosophy that is often referred to as the ‘argument from incongruent counterparts’ (see Kant, 2003). It played a crucial role in Kant’s movement toward a conception of intuition as a concept-independent source of knowledge. Although dating back two and a half centuries and originally intended against Leibniz’s relational account of space, the argument is not necessarily confined to an outdated Newtonian framework. In brief, Leibniz’s relational account maintains that mathematical description suffices for a complete understanding of objects in space-time. Kant now asks us to imagine that God creates a three-dimensional universe with nothing but a left and a right hand in it that are each other’s perfect counterpart. According to Kant, the relational account, which only considers conceptual determinations, will be unable to decide whether the hands are right or left ones. That is, mathematical connections alone are insufficient to differentiate objects that are incongruent but identical in every other (conceptual) respect. According to Hanna, the argument shows that Kant was a non-conceptualist: one needs intuition, and more precisely an embodied viewpoint from which to intuit, in order to account for certain aspects of object-experience.

As I have argued at length elsewhere,¹⁴ Hanna’s case does not hold against McDowell’s reading of Kant or conceptualists generally. Although Hanna is right that for Kant there is an independent contribution intuition makes which we can isolate by means of thought experiments, this contribution is *de facto* conceptually explicable. Consider yourself: you *are* in fact an embodied observer with a faculty of sensibility, and it is no problem for you to state the difference between right and left hands. This proves that although intuition’s non-conceptual contribution might be a transcendental condition for you being able to conceptualize certain features of experienced reality, but also that it does not in any obvious way commit one to the existence of inexplicable personal-level contents.

Transcendental Necessity of Sensations: Cases of Illusion

McDowell’s idea that we need not appeal to sensations for a complete picture of the structure of justification has struck many as implausible. Neo-Sellarsians in particular feel that McDowell unjustly trials Sellars for committing to a Given. I will here focus on the Neo-Sellarsian arguments for the transcendental necessity of sensations by Foreman (2006) and De Vries (2011) based on illusion.¹⁵

De Vries notes that for some cases of perceptual illusion, delusion or hallucination ‘it is [...] necessary to impose a layer of internal states that mediate – causally, not epistemically – between the world and our perceptual beliefs’ (De Vries, 2011, p. 49). De Vries thinks that, since McDowell is reluctant to

posit such internal representations, he cannot account for illusions. The general idea is that for instance in misrepresentations, such as in the Müller-Lyer illusion, we have to invoke two levels of representations. On the one hand, there is the conscious (or ‘acquired’: Dretske, 1995) representational content: we know (at least if we are familiar with the illusion) that we see two lines of equal size. Our perception, however, is reluctant to accept this meta-knowledge. Although we know both lines are equally sized, we continue to represent the one as being longer than the other. According to De Vries, the only way to explain this is by invoking two layers of representation: one epistemically efficacious (cf. ‘acquired’), the other only causally efficacious (or ‘systemic’: Dretske, 1995).

Foreman (2006) also believes that Sellars’s model is superior to McDowell in that only the former successfully explains misrepresentation. Both conclude that it makes little sense to posit non-conceptual sensory representations just in rare cases of illusion; we have to assume they are at work in all perceptual experiences. Foreman adds to this that non-conceptual sensations are in fact necessary to explain how we come to have conceptual representations in the first place. Sensations are thus *transcendentally necessary* theoretical entities that have to be posited in order to talk about knowledgeable experience. Even granted that such sensations are a kind of Given, as they have no epistemologically relevant relation to the contents of beliefs, they cannot be left out of a complete transcendental story of human knowledge. Without sense data, no ascendance into the space of reasons (see Foreman, 2006, pp. 115–20; De Vries, 2011, pp. 49–53).

It is important to note here that McDowell himself commits to the idea that first nature constrains second nature (see especially McDowell, 1998b). Although first nature has no epistemic bearing on our beliefs, it causally constrains what can be believed and what cannot. For instance, the physiological structures of one’s retina constrain the spectrum of colors one can see. Although these structures deliver no epistemic input, they do causally constrain beliefs about color experience. But how, then, does first nature execute this constraint without there being some point at which it meets the space of reasons? It seems such a point of contact is implied in McDowell’s own commitment to a first nature constraint, thus implying the transcendental necessity of positing sense data.

To my mind, this argument has a good chance of successfully establishing the transcendental need to posit sensations. However, it may still easily be claimed that a transcendental notion of sensations is not incompatible with a conceptualist stance; it merely complements the conceptualist thesis with a minimal, perhaps almost negligible notion of non-conceptual content that has no epistemic import. The Sellarsian construal of non-conceptual sensations does not appear to affect McDowell’s general conceptualist outline, although arguably it does make the transcendental picture more complete.

The Argument Non Sequitur

One of the most significant sources of criticism of conceptualism is a small passage in Chapter II of *Mind and World*.¹⁶ Part of McDowell's thesis has been to suggest that, since perception does not provide us with bare, non-conceptual givens, the content of perception has to be conceptual (see McDowell, 1994, p. 7). However, critics claim it is not specified why it would follow from the fact that experience is not a bare given that its content is conceptual. The argument does not make clear why the exclusion of bare sense data would demand the overly strong claim that there is no non-conceptual content. This criticism has been espoused, among others, by Wright (1996), who claims that the possibility of 'intermediate space' between conceptual content and bare Givens is not explored by McDowell.

A similar type of logical fallacy has been insinuated by among others Heck (2000), Peacocke (2001a) and Hopp (2010). From the fact that some *A* has the property to become involved in *B* it does not follow that the content or structure of *A* is of the specific type *B* has. All that is required on the conceptualist's own premises is that the content of perception is such that it allows being taken up in conceptual judgment, i.e., that it is an opportunity for judging. But this condition could be sufficiently fulfilled with a weaker claim, for instance by saying that the contents of experience are representational. Block (1995, p. 232) also abides to this common factor, asserting that 'only representational content can figure in reasoning'.

The first, most obvious response a conceptualist could give is that conceptualism simply equates the idea of some content's being an exploitable source in a judgment with being conceptual (see McDowell, 2009, p. 265; 2013, p. 42; Brewer, 1999, pp. 149–50). However, if conceptualism wants to maintain a categorical difference between thought and perception, as Kant did, then it has to differentiate between concepts as the active products of spontaneity and those contents that figure in intuition. Intuitions, then, do not involve concepts or acts of judgment, which would amount to an equation of the products of thought and sensibility, but they do have conceptual content, which means that they are part of the space of reasons.

A second reply could be formulated by considering the conceptualist's motives for saying that experience would have conceptual content. On the reading of McDowell I have offered, these motives are not psychological or phenomenological but rather ontological. Although an appeal to intermediary types of content located between Givens and conceptual contents would not necessarily contravene the nature of this ontological commitment, the Wittgensteinian idea that 'there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought' (McDowell, 1994, p. 27) clearly lends itself poorly to intermediary notions. Furthermore, as long as intermediary contents are open to reason, their positing will not contravene the weak epistemic conceptualist position as I demarcated it earlier.

4. The Conceptualism/Non-Conceptualism Divide

The previous section gave an overview of the most important arguments against conceptualism of the past decades. The primary aims thus far were to (i) clarify the core thesis of McDowell's conceptualism and to (ii) show that most arguments for non-conceptual content have little bearing on it, even though they were often directed against McDowell. If it is true that conceptualists could in principle agree with non-conceptualists and *vice versa*, then it follows that there is no genuine opposition between the two terms. I now turn to a number of influential attempts to structure the debate about non-conceptual content, to see whether they have addressed this problem and have offered successful solutions to it.

One of the first clarificatory attempts stems from Peacocke (1992), who developed the *Autonomy Thesis* which was subsequently criticized by Bermúdez. Consider what Bermúdez (2011) says about autonomous non-conceptual content:

One thesis that might be held about nonconceptual content is that a thinker can represent the world nonconceptually without possessing *any* concepts at all.

The core idea is explained here, at least to my mind, fairly poorly. It makes little sense to speak of someone who possesses no concepts at all as a *thinker* and as representing *the world*. Moreover, the autonomy thesis appears to be irrelevant to the conceptualist thesis, which is in fact solely concerned with the experience of rational animals.¹⁷ Elsewhere, Bermúdez has more plausibly suggested that a non-conceptual content is one that represents the world 'even though the bearer of those mental states need not possess the concepts required to specify their content' (Bermúdez, 2011). This interpretation, however, is ambiguous regarding two possible readings. That it is not *demanding* that an agent possesses the appropriate concepts can mean either that s/he does possess them but does not actively employ them or that s/he does not possess them but that the content would nonetheless meaningfully reveal something to the experiencer. Although these are two very different things, the definition above does not seem to differentiate between them.

In an influential paper from 2000, Heck argues that much of the ongoing debate concerning the contents of perception rests on a conflation of two different notions of (non-)conceptualism. The two notions in question are 'state' and 'content' non-conceptualism. More recently, Speaks has adapted this divide, arguing that current debates confuse what he calls 'absolute' and 'relative' non-conceptualism. I will here treat Heck's and Speaks's readings as similar and proceed with Speaks's account. For Speaks, absolute non-conceptualism pertains specifically to a *type of content*. Relative non-conceptualism, on the other

hand, to the *agent's capacity* to conceptually grasp or possess the relevant content:

A mental state of an agent *A* (at a time *t*) has *relatively nonconceptual content* iff the content of that mental state includes contents not grasped (possessed) by *A* at *t*. (Speaks, 2005, p. 360)

Further on, Speaks (2005, p. 376) writes that relative non-conceptual content concerns 'the idea of possessing, or grasping, a concept or content'. Relative non-conceptualism thus connects specifically to the capacity (or lack of it) of an agent to specify the content of a perception conceptually. It obtains if, at any point in time, an agent does not actualize conceptual capacities actively. By contrast, a content is absolutely non-conceptual if that content itself is proved to be of a wholly different kind than that of beliefs or thoughts.

Speaks wants to show that, although often wrongly taken so, none of the arguments for non-conceptualism actually prove the existence of absolute non-conceptual content. Instead, they can all be reduced to the weaker claim that a particular content is not *conceptualized* at any instance, which points to a lack of capacity, and thus to relative non-conceptualism. This can be illustrated briefly by means of Peacocke's non-rational animals analogy. Peacocke (2001b, p. 614) asserts that 'many of us would [...] 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 human and of lower animals'. Given that the lower animals have no conceptual capacities, and that the perception of a brown surface is shared by us and the lower animals, some human perceptual content also has to be non-conceptual. Speaks, however, challenges this conclusion. On his reading, all that has been proved is that animals lack conceptual capacities; that their perception contains content that is not conceptualized. The conclusion that the content itself is non-conceptual would be unsupported.

I believe Speaks's distinction brings about at least three problems. First and most importantly, it is not made clear what, according to Speaks, would count as a sufficient condition for absolute non-conceptual content. As it stands, it seems that any claim about non-conceptual content can be reduced to a capacity for actualization. On Speaks's use of the terms, the possibility that a content would somehow be conceptual in spite of an agent's lack of the demanded conceptual capacities can never be ruled out. Therefore, it turns out to be impossible to establish absolute non-conceptual content, which renders the term (and *a fortiori* the whole distinction) useless.

My second objection to Speaks is that the distinction between exercised capacities and the ontological status of the content is intrinsically flawed.¹⁸ Speaks assumes (and Heck likewise) that one can distinguish between on the one hand conceptual capacities and on the other conceptual contents, such that one can have conceptual contents while lacking conceptual capacities. My objection to this is that conceptual content cannot be understood separately

from an agent who actualizes it, or more broadly, an experience which somehow accounts for it. No content or mental episode is anything over and above its actualization in a subject's lived experience. Speaks's distinction, however, is founded on the idea that it is possible to separate types of content from their actualization in networks of experiences. This assumption is false: it makes no sense to speak of conceptual content inherent to experiencing systems that lack all the right capacities required to instantiate that content.

A third problem is that Speaks's (much like Bermúdez's) notion of relative non-conceptualism fails to distinguish between two very different things. Speaks asserts that a mental content is relatively non-conceptual if and only if that state comprises of content which the agent does not conceptually grasp *or* has conceptual possession of. But to possess and to grasp are two different things. To fail to grasp a content conceptually at a given time *t* is to say that a subject may perceive things without explicating what he or she sees at *t*. Clearly, this is a very weak view of non-conceptual content to which conceptualists like McDowell would readily abide. But if by possession Speaks means that an agent does not possess the relevant concepts to explicate the experiential content, this would yield a significantly stronger claim. Whereas relative non-conceptualism in the first sense is concerned with a momentary lack of actualization of a fitting concept, the second thesis includes the possibility of not possessing the relevant concept at all. The importance of this distinction is supported by the fact that conceptualism denies the existence of contents which are extrinsic to rationality (the possession condition), whereas it may comfortably accept that we need not grasp a content conceptually at time *t* (the grasping condition). But since Speaks confuses both senses of relative non-conceptualism, he fails to accommodate this important difference.

If we follow Speaks, we thus end up with a notion of conceptualism that is impossible to support and a kind of non-conceptual content that is ambiguous as to a kind everyone accepts and another more contentious one. Even though a slight improvement can be achieved by splitting the notion of relative non-conceptual content in two, as I have just done, this still leaves ('absolute') conceptualism standing on the other side as an untenable position that has little to do with what conceptualists are defending.

5. An Alternative Pluralistic Approach

The past decades have seen an explosion of arguments for non-conceptual content. My first aim in this paper was to show that even though these arguments have often been directed against McDowell, most of them actually do not contravene the core conceptualist thesis as I have outlined it. I argued that this has resulted in an imbalance of the terms conceptual and non-conceptual which has not been properly brought into view and which threatens the heuristic value of the terms. The previous section showed that more recent attempts to

structure the debate fail to account both for the variety of ways in which non-conceptualism is being used as well as for the only variety of conceptualism really endorsed by anyone, which I have addressed as ‘weak epistemic conceptualism’. In this final section, I want to briefly explore an alternative route out of this mess, one which I take to involve the least distortion of both weak epistemic conceptualism as well as the various other kinds of non-conceptual content that have been developed over the past years. My suggestion is a pluralistic understanding of the problem, by which we discern different approaches to non-conceptual content that do not necessarily contradict each other.

Based on what I have analyzed, a number of such approaches can be discerned already. The first is weak epistemic conceptualism, according to which conceptual content involves everything belonging to the space of reasons, and non-conceptual content everything that does not belong to it. Importantly, weak epistemic conceptualism is a philosophical theory of justification. It pertains solely to rational animals and is principally impervious to psychological arguments about sub-personal computational processes. Skillful copings and situated normative acts can, conform this divide, legitimately be called conceptual.

Second, the phenomenological arguments discussed show that there is also a way in which to talk meaningfully of non-conceptual content which has exclusively descriptive-phenomenological purport and no direct epistemic implications. An example of this is Dreyfus’s claim that skillful coping has no subject/object-distance and therefore has no conceptual content. For descriptive phenomenology, experiences lacking active engagement on behalf of the subject may legitimately be called non-conceptual.

Third, a psychological approach to content could make use of notions of non-conceptual content particularly with regard to sub-personal states, which can be used among others to explain illusions, even though this too has no direct epistemic ramifications.

As long as we keep epistemic concerns and psychological or phenomenological descriptive matters separated, conceptualism and non-conceptualism might be understood as co-existent theories. This distinction between *epistemic* and *descriptive* approaches to conceptualism I am suggesting should not be taken to imply that phenomenological or psychological descriptions of experience stand independently from questions regarding whether and how experience justifies beliefs. If that were the case, it would leave epistemic conceptualism floating over and above both phenomenological and naturalist investigations into human nature. But invoking distinctions between different approaches and acknowledging the heuristic value of them in clarifying certain misunderstandings does not amount to that. There is no way to make sense of an epistemological theory if it outright contradicts the phenomenology of perceptual experience. For that reason, a plurality of approaches to the debate about non-conceptual content does not serve to suggest that their respective concerns are *wholly* unrelated. It only helps bring to light a difference between

asking about the scope of the space of reasons and asking how experience works from a phenomenological or psychological point of view – a difference which, if not properly understood, can lead to confusing debates about perception's conceptual content.

To my mind, this briefly-sketched approach-based clarification of the debate about non-conceptual content is already more successful in making the compatibility of weak epistemic conceptualism with its counterarguments understandable than any of the attempts I have discussed. Additionally, it creates new space to develop in a more systematic fashion other approaches to non-conceptual content that can stand next to McDowell's, which may be deepened and complemented with new varieties of conceptual, non-conceptual, and possible intermediary types of content. Furthermore, a pluralistic understanding may stimulate more direct engagement of phenomenologists with epistemic conceptualism – attempts at which thus far appear to have stranded in forms of descriptive non-conceptualism. The choice, then, will no longer have to be between conceptualism and non-conceptualism, which, to my mind, is how things stood all along.

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Notes

- 1 See esp. McDowell, (1994). Other important conceptualist readings include Brewer's (1999).
- 2 The crucial passages in the *Critique* are sometimes referred to as the second step of the B-Deduction. In these passages, Kant makes it clear that he believes that perception is made possible by the categories. This move allows him to secure the transcendental function of the categories. See Kant (1998, B160–2). See also Van Mazijk (2014a, 2014b) for more elaborate expositions of Kantian conceptualism.
- 3 Although I do argue that Kant was in one sense a non-conceptualist, I deny that this kind of non-conceptualism has much effect on the central transcendental-foundational task of the critique, which is also, on my reading, what McDowell is interested in.
- 4 See Kant, 1998, A50/B74.
- 5 See McDowell, 1994, pp. 84–6; also 1998b, pp. 184–8.
- 6 Note that McDowell does not yet speak of conceptualism here.
- 7 Truth is a correspondence between the thing and intellect. This view is usually ascribed to Aristotle and later to Aquinas, but comparable exclamations can be found even before Aristotle. See also David (2009) for an introduction to correspondence theory.
- 8 It should be noted, however, that the world in question cannot be the same one Modernists had in mind. McDowell's external world or externalized space of reasons is, in a quite Kantian sense, one invested with spontaneity, which makes it a world of subjective experience rather than a noumenal reality.
- 9 The kind of externalism I have in mind should not be confused with the semantic or social externalism of Putnam (1975) and Burge (2007[1986]). It is instead much closer to what we find in Wittgenstein (1986) and likewise throughout the

- phenomenological tradition, including Heidegger (2012) and, although many consider this a more contentious claim, Husserl (1983).
- 10 I think Heck (2000) is right that demonstrative concepts in McDowell's sense are essentially dependent on the perceptual state and therefore do not live up to the conditions for concepts set by Evans, which further means that there need not be a genuine dispute between them (Heck 2000, pp. 483–92).
 - 11 In a footnote, McDowell explains that although a wine expert may lack the proper words, s/he may nonetheless obtain mental stores of knowledge of certain wine flavors, thus ensuring their reusability in future acts, as a commonsensical definition of concept demands: see McDowell, 1994, p. 57.
 - 12 Hanna's (2008) concern that a demonstrative concept is somewhat of a chimera, containing both exercises of conceptual capacities and perceptual content, and for that reason might as well be called perceptual, seems to fail for the same reason.
 - 13 Similar objections can also found in McDowell (1994); Brewer (1999); Speaks (2005).
 - 14 I discuss this point more elaborately in Van Mazijk, 2014b.
 - 15 Other philosophers who draw on illusions to make similar points are among others Crane (1988, 1992) and Bermúdez (1995, 2011).
 - 16 'In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement [...] So it is conceptual content': McDowell, 1994, p. 26.
 - 17 Someone who possesses no concepts at all cannot be rational.
 - 18 See also Toribio (2008) who appears to reach a similar conclusion.

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