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Articles
SEAN D. KELLY: The Non-conceptual Content of Perceptual Experience: Situation Dependence and Fineness of Grain

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print article

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I begin by examining a recent debate between John McDowell and Christopher Peacocke over whether the content of perceptual experience is non-conceptual. Although I am sympathetic to Peacocke's claim that perceptual content is non-conceptual, I suggest a number of ways in which his arguments fail to make that case. This failure stems from an over-emphasis on the "fine-grainedness" of perceptual content – a feature that is relatively unimportant to its non-conceptual structure. I go on to describe two other features of perceptual experience that are more likely to be relevant to the claim that perceptual content is non-conceptual. These features are 1) the dependence of a perceived object on the perceptual context in which it is perceived and 2) the dependence of a perceived property on the object it is perceived to be a property of.

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1. Recently in this journal, Christopher Peacocke published an article defending the idea that the content of perceptual experience is non-conceptual.†1 Peacocke defends this claim against John McDowell's attack on non-conceptual content in chapter 3 of *Mind and World*.†2 The debate between Peacocke and McDowell focuses on one of the ways (there are others) in which perceptual content is often said to be different in kind from the content of our (conceptual) linguistic utterances or thoughts: namely, perceptual content is often said to be "finer grained" than the concepts in terms of which we report our perceptual experiences. I am myself sympathetic to the idea that perceptual content is non-conceptual, and I am therefore, in a general way, sympathetic to the project in which Peacocke is engaged. I believe, however, that the defense he offers of non-conceptual content is weaker than it should be. This weakness stems, in my view, from the fact that the fine-grainedness of perceptual experience is not as relevant to its non-conceptual structure as a certain kind of situation dependence is. In this paper I will first suggest a number of ways in which Peacocke's arguments fail to make the case for the

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non-conceptual structure of perceptual content. My criticism of Peacocke's argument is different, I believe, from the criticism that McDowell proposes in his response to Peacocke's paper, though I will not attempt to compare our views here.†3 Having shown that Peacocke's arguments do not succeed, I will go on in §3 to describe two features of perceptual experience—the dependence of a perceived object on the perceptual context in which it is perceived and the dependence of a perceived property on the object it is perceived to be a property of—which, I believe, are more likely than fineness of grain to be relevant to the claim that perceptual content is non-conceptual.

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Before I get started on my criticism of Peacocke's argument, let me first give a general idea of the contours of the debate between him and McDowell (as I understand it). The question at issue, to begin with, is whether perceptual experience is more finely grained than the concepts we have to describe it. For the standard example of this, think of the various shades of color we can discriminate perceptually but for which we have no general color concept. Insofar as our perceptual discriminations are more finely grained than our general color concepts—we can discriminate more colors than we have color concepts for—one might be tempted to claim that perceptual experience is non-conceptual: the general color concepts seem to be insufficient to characterize adequately the content of the experience.

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Once we understand this basic idea, then roughly speaking, the debate between Peacocke and McDowell goes like this: McDowell claims that even if perceptual content is not articulable in terms of general concepts, it is articulable in terms of demonstrative concepts, concepts like <that shade>; Gareth Evans, he notes, the original proponent of non-conceptual content, failed to consider this possibility. Once we allow for the possibility of demonstrative concepts, according to McDowell, the need for a non-conceptual perceptual content is no longer pressing: demonstrative concepts can do the job of characterizing the content of our perceptual states.

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Peacocke counters by claiming that demonstrative concepts aren't up to the task. I'll explore this claim more carefully in §2, but the general idea is that perceptual content, according to Peacocke, is inadequately characterized both by general concepts, like the color concept <mauve>, and by demonstrative concepts, like <that shade>: it cuts more finely than the one (general concepts), but less finely than the other (demonstrative concepts). The result, Peacocke argues, is that perceptual content is not conceptual even if we allow for McDowell's trick of using demonstrative concepts.

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The details of the debate will become clearer, I hope, as this paper proceeds. For the moment what is important to remember is that McDowell introduces the following idea into the debate: a demonstrative concept may be

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able to be used to characterize the content of a given perceptual experience. Now, I'll turn to Peacocke's treatment of the situation.

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2. Peacocke distinguishes between three levels of description that are applicable to a subject perceiving the shape of an object (or generally, some visible property F of an object). Roughly, these levels are:

(i) the shape itself.
(ii) the shape as perceived in experience (or, as we might say, the "perceived shape").
(iii) the shape as demonstratively conceptualized (as, for instance, in the utterance "that shape" or "that square").

The goal of the non-conceptualist, according to Peacocke, is to show that levels (ii) and (iii) come apart. (We can agree that this is at least a necessary condition for the success of the non-conceptualist position.) McDowell, on the other hand, as a conceptualist about perceptual content, wants to explain level (ii) in terms of level (iii). The argument comes over whether this is possible.

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In order to show that it is not possible to explain perceived properties in terms of demonstrative concepts, Peacocke first tries to show that demonstrative concepts are too fine-grained:

I think McDowell is right when he complains that Evans, for all his important contributions, overlooked demonstrative concepts. But it seems to me that these demonstrative concepts slice *too* finely to capture the ways of level (ii). Consider "that shade", "that red", "that scarlet". These are all different conceptual contents. It seems to me quite implausible that just one of these, and not the others, features in the representational content of the experience of a shade of red.†4

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I don't think this is a very strong argument. The crux of the argument seems to reside in the claim that many different demonstrative concepts must feature in the representational content of a single experience. It is "quite implausible," as Peacocke says, that this should fail to be the case. But I'm not convinced. Here's why.

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It is true, of course, that "that shade", "that red", and "that scarlet" are different concepts, and it is also true that they could all pick out the same color swatch. If that color swatch *is* both colored and red and scarlet, then naturally all those demonstrative concepts will pick it out. But what the demonstrative concepts pick out in this case is the property itself, as described at level (i). To claim further that they all pick out the same

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perceived property, as described in level (ii), seems to me to require independent justification. After all, at least on the face of it, the fact that the color of my scarf is accurately describable as a shade and as a shade of red and as a shade of scarlet doesn't indicate that my experience of it as a shade is the same as my experience of it as a shade of red and my experience of it as a shade of scarlet. Indeed, it seems plausible to think that if I'm grouping it with a variety of different red things I may experience its color differently than if I'm grouping it with a variety of different scarlet things. And in fact, if I'm grouping it with a variety of different red things then it's at least conceivable that the demonstrative concept "that red" will get the experience right, but the demonstrative concept "that scarlet" won't. If that's right, then demonstrative concepts don't slice too finely at all. They slice just about right.
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Now, I'm not sure how seriously to take this criticism of Peacocke. At least it seems to require a response if the non-conceptualist wants to stick with his strategy of showing that demonstrative concepts are too fine grained to account for perceptual experience, and I don't see that Peacocke has one. Since I don't think this strategy does much to help the non-conceptualist anyway, I'm tempted to leave the issue to one side. But Peacocke pursues the problem one stage further, so let me just say this extra bit.
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Suppose it could be more convincingly argued, *pace* the criticism above, that demonstrative concepts are too fine grained to account for the content of perceptual experience. Still, it seems that the conceptualist has available to him either of two moves. In the first place, he could accept the option Peacocke offers him of taking "the most specific concept in the repertoire of the perceiver to capture the fine-grained content"†5 of the experience. Peacocke thinks this won't work because of the intuition he has that the experience of the color of, for instance, a scarlet scarf is exactly the same for the person whose conceptual repertoire includes "scarlet" as it is for the person whose repertoire stops with "red". As Peacocke says, "[T]here is a single shade … that they both experience, and in the same ways".†6 But is this intuition enough?
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Peacocke leaves the intuition undefended, and it seems at least *prima facie* plausible to deny it. For instance, we might reasonably imagine that the painter or the interior decorator, with her mastery of the various color minutiae, just sees things differently than I do with my limited array of color concepts. To defend this idea we might say that part of what she sees is that this scarlet scarf looks like color chip r-235, but not like r-110; and this could mean, if we chose the color chips properly, that she saw it as scarlet, but not as a more canonical shade of red. If for me there is no distinction

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between the experience of these two shades, while for her there is, then surely the content of my experience is different from the content of hers. Therefore, if this account of color perception is right, then although there is a single shade that we both experience, we nevertheless experience that single shade differently. And furthermore this difference seems to be attributable to our different conceptual repertoires.
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Now, I don't think this account of color perception is ultimately defensible, for reasons I'll explain in §3. But the reasons I bring to bear against it there have nothing to do with the intuitions that motivate Peacocke's view. So I don't see that Peacocke has a decent response to this line of argument, at least not on the basis of the account he develops in the article I'm considering. So much for the first conceptualist line of response.
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The other option for the conceptualist is also suggested by something Peacocke says. The conceptualist could simply accept Peacocke's intuition that the experience stays the same no matter what fine-grained concepts I have, and explain the content of the perception in terms of the "medium-grained" demonstrative concept "that shade". If it is true, as Peacocke says, that "there is a single shade…that [the variously adept observers] experience, and in the same ways,"†7 then the demonstrative concept "that shade" should properly pick out the right perceived shade, and hence get the content of the experience right. Peacocke's description of the claim makes this unavoidable, since once he identifies the content of the experience in terms of the single perceived shade, pointing to it with the phrase "that shade" seems a perfectly reasonable way to pick it out. The way Peacocke gets around this explanation in his example is by stipulating that neither of the observers has the general concept "shade". In the example in question Peacocke wants to focus on:

the fine-grained representational content of experience of two people, *neither of whom has the general concept "shade"*, but one of whom has the concept "scarlet", and the other of whom has only "red" but not "scarlet"…†8

But this seems to me unfair. If you have the specific concept "red", then you must know that it refers to some feature of the object, and what is that feature if not its color or shade? So it seems to me that if McDowell is going to accept Peacocke's intuition that the possession of fine-grained concepts doesn't change experience, then it is still open to him to explain perceptual content in terms of demonstrative concepts of the medium-grained sort—concepts like "that shade," "that shape," and so on. Again, I will argue in §3 that this rejoinder does not work, but I remain unconvinced that Peacocke's stance against it is satisfying.

3. It looks to me, then, that the argument that demonstrative concepts are too fine-grained to account for experience is not a very convincing one. But in a way that's all by the by, since I don't think that it was getting at the important phenomenon anyway. I think that the important point about the perception of properties is twofold: first, that properties are not, as presented in experience, independent of the context in which they are perceived, and second, that they are not, as presented in experience, independent of the object they are perceived to be a property of. I suspect that Peacocke has believed in these two types of dependencies at various points in his career, though I'm not sure he's ever advocated both simultaneously. I think he should, and I also think that if he does, he will have the resources necessary to block the possible responses I considered just now on McDowell's behalf. So let me say a bit about the dependencies.

The first kind of dependency—the dependency of a perceived property on the context in which it is perceived—is admirably illustrated by the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. In the case of color this is the phenomenon whereby I experience an object to be the same color in various lighting conditions even though these conditions change the way I experience the color. For instance, I see the color of my entire office wall to be white, and indeed the same shade of white, even when some parts of the wall are better lit than others. At the same time, however, my experience of the poorly lit section is not the same as my experience of the well-lit section: one looks better lit than the other. Peacocke uses this phenomenon to great effect in chapter 1 of *Sense and Content*†9 in order to argue that perceptual experience has an essential sensory component, the component that characterizes "what-it's-like-to-have-the-experience". The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, uses this phenomenon to argue, among other things, that perceptual experience has an essential informational component, the component that tells something about the features of the object being experienced.†10

Properly understood, both of these are important aspects of the phenomenon of perception. It may be, however, that they are not properly understood as sensory and informational components of experience. Indeed, I suspect that Peacocke now thinks the conclusion he then reached in considering these phenomena—the conclusion that there is an ineliminable sensory

component to perceptual experience—is a faulty one. I suspect this because the argument for that claim depended upon the premise that representational content is always conceptual, and of course he doesn't believe that anymore. But even if the conclusion is faulty, the phenomenon it was meant to explain is still an important one to consider. And it's especially important in this context because I think that, rightly considered, the phenomenon of constancy shows why medium-grained demonstrative concepts can't completely capture the content of perception. Let me try to say why.

On my view the phenomenon of perceptual constancy shows us something crucial about the context dependence of perceptual experience. In particular, it shows us that the complete and accurate account of my perceptual experience of the color of an object must contain some reference to the lighting context in which that color is perceived. Without a reference to the context we won't have the resources necessary to explain the change in experience that occurs when the lighting context is varied. If it is right, as all perceptual psychologists agree, that this change is not a change in color (hence the name

"color constancy"), then no color concept, not even a demonstrative one, could completely describe the content of a color experience. So even if McDowell were to try to explain perception in terms of the medium-grained concepts mentioned above, such an explanation would be inadequate because the phrase "that color" is unable to distinguish between that color as presented in the sun and that same color as presented in the shade. Because the relevant difference is not a difference in color, no color term could make such a distinction. Since such a distinction is clearly made in experience—the color looks different in the sun than in the shade—the demonstrative concept is inadequate to account for the experience.

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The second kind of dependency—the dependency of a perceived property on the object it's perceived to be a property of—is shown by Peacocke's example of the height of the window and the height of the arch,†11 and also by Merleau-Ponty's equivalent claim†12 that "the blue of the carpet would not be the same blue were it not a woolly blue." The basic idea is that when I perceive a property like height or color, what I see is not some independently determinable property that any other object could share; rather what I see is a dependent aspect of the object I'm seeing now. The dependency of the perceived property on the object is so complete that even if I see the color of the carpet to be the same as the color of some other object—a shiny steel ball, for instance—I can always rationally wonder whether they are in fact the same color. I can, of course, satisfy myself that they are the same color by

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measuring the wavelength of the light they reflect, just as I can satisfy myself that the window and the arch are the same height by measuring them with a tape measure. But this doesn't tell me anything about the content of the original perceptual experience, since it's on the basis of the new, measuring experience that I come to believe in the equivalence.

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Now, if it's really true that this second type of dependency obtains, then it seems to block the possibility of the initial conceptualist line of thought. Remember that this is the line of thought according to which we accept the claim that the most specific concept in the repertoire of the perceiver captures her perceptual experience, while denying Peacocke's intuition that perceptual experience doesn't vary with conceptual sophistication. The justification for this denial is found in the *prima facie* plausible claim that the painter sees the scarlet scarf in terms of its resemblance to a certain color chip, not some other. But if a perceived color isn't describable independently of its object, then it must be false that the painter's perception of color is explicable in terms of resemblance to an objective measure. After all, the color chip r-235 presents an independently specifiable property that any object could have, while the scarlet of the scarf is not presented in perception as a color identifiable independently of the scarf. The point is much like that made above concerning context. A demonstrative concept like "that scarlet" can only pick out one scarlet among others. But the difference between the experience of the scarlet scarf and the experience of the scarlet steel ball is *ex hypothesi* not due to a difference of color (this shade of scarlet versus that shade of scarlet), but rather is due to a difference in the object seen to manifest that color. No color term alone could make that distinction.

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If these two observations about perception are right, then demonstrative concepts are too coarse-grained, not too fine-grained, to capture perceptual content. Concepts, even demonstrative ones, pick out situation independent features, but the perceptual experience of a property is always dependent upon the two aspects of the situation I mentioned above—context and object. It is still open to the conceptualist to argue that perceptual content is explicable in terms of the conjunction of a variety of demonstrative concepts—one that picks out the property, one that picks out the object that manifests that property, and then a large set of demonstrative concepts that picks out the relevant features of the context in which the property is being perceived. But it seems as though this last set will present a sticking point, since there could be an indefinitely large number of relevant contextual features, and which features of the context are relevant will change from situation to situation. This seems to me a more likely reason that perceptual content is non-conceptual—because it's situation dependent, and situations aren't specifiable in conceptual terms.

Notes

Footnote Page 601

1. Peacocke, Christopher, "Nonconceptual content defended," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LVIII, No. 2, June 1998, pp. 381–88.

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2. McDowell, John, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
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3. See McDowell, John, "Reply to Commentators," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LVIII, No. 2, June 1998, esp. pp. 414–19.
Footnote Page 603
4. *Ibid*., p. 382.
Footnote Page 604
5. *Ibid*.
Footnote Page 604
6. *Ibid*.
Footnote Page 605
7. *Ibid*.
Footnote Page 605
8. *Ibid*., my italics.
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9. See Peacocke, Christopher, *Sense and Content: experience, thought, and their relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). I don't think Peacocke actually groups his examples under the heading of perceptual constancy, but the examples he considers—the color of a wall in different lighting contexts, the size of a tree at different distances, and the loudness of a car engine when far away or close—are obvious examples of that phenomenon.
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10. See the chapter entitled "The Thing and the Natural World," in Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).
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11. See Peacocke, Christopher, "Perceptual Content," in *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. Almog, Perry, and Wettstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
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12. I see these examples as equivalent, both pointing to the second dependency. But it may be that Peacocke is making a different point when he uses the example in "Perceptual Content".

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