

## On the Nonconceptual Content of Experience

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“The triumph of hope over experience”  
Samuel Johnson on second marriages

I suppose that substantive philosophical theses are much like second marriages. The philosophical thesis I wish to discuss in this paper is the thesis that experiences have nonconceptual content. I shall not attempt to argue that *all* experiences have nonconceptual content nor that the only contents experiences have are nonconceptual. Instead, I want to flesh out the thesis of nonconceptual content for experience in more detail than has been offered hithertofore and to provide a variety of motivations for the view—motivations that are broader than those that are typically adduced.

### I. Thought, content and concept possession

Before we can take up the question of what it is for an experience to have a nonconceptual content, some preliminary remarks are necessary on how I shall be using the terms ‘concept’ and ‘thought content’ in this essay. The content of a thought, as I shall understand it, is what is thought, and intuitively what is thought individuates in a fine-grained way. Consider the case of the thought that coriander is a spice. Intuitively, what I think when I have this thought is not what I think, when I think that cilantro is a spice. The two thoughts play different roles in rationalizing explanations. This is why it is possible for me to *discover* that coriander is cilantro. The concepts *coriander* and *cilantro* have the same referent, but the way in which the referent is presented in the two cases is different. One who thinks of coriander (cilantro) as coriander thinks of it under a different guise or in a different way from one who thinks of it as cilantro. So, the content of the one thought is different from the content of the other.

In general, I take thought contents to be indicated by the ‘that’-clauses used to attribute thoughts. Moreover, in the first person case, I take the content attributed via the ‘that’-clause to be the content of the thought, assuming that the thought ascription is true.<sup>1</sup> In the third person case, the situation is more complicated. Here the thought ascription is sometimes counted as true even if the content of the thought is not the same as the content attributed, so long as there is sufficient similarity between the two. Accordingly, I take the ‘that’-clause in such a case to indicate that the thought has a content that, in the given context, is sufficiently similar to the content of the sentence embedded in the ‘that’-clause.

As I use the term ‘concept’, concepts are not linguistic terms in a public language. They are

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1. This is to oversimplify a little. A further assumption is that the thought ascribed is a present thought. (We have privileged access to the contents of our present thoughts, not to the contents of our past ones. See here McLaughlin and Tye 1998). Attributions of past thought contents should be treated in the same way as third person attributions below.

mental representations of a sort that can occur in thought.<sup>2</sup> Thoughts are composed of concepts, and the contents of concepts individuate in a fine-grained way. As illustrated in the case above of the concepts *cilantro* and *coriander*, concepts that refer to the same entities can differ in their content. Indeed, concepts can differ in their content even if they refer to the same entity in all possible worlds. For example, the concept *Hesperus* has a different content from the concept *Phosphorus*, even though they both refer to the planet Venus in all possible worlds. This is why the thought that Hesperus is a planet is a different thought from the thought that Phosphorus is a planet. Similar comments apply to the concept *four* and the concept *two times two*. A small child who can count to four has the former concept; but she may not yet have learned how to multiply and thus may lack the latter concept. Such a child can think the thought that four is greater than three without being able to think the thought that two times two is greater than three. Likewise, in my view, the concept *fortnight* has a different content from the concept *fourteen days*. One might be misinformed and believe that a fortnight is ten days without thereby believing that a fourteen days is ten days. Concepts of which one has a partial understanding are still concepts one may exercise in belief and thought.

So far I have not said anything directly about concept *possession*. This too merits some brief preliminary discussion. What is it for a given concept to be a concept of *mine*? What is it for me to *possess* a concept? A straightforward answer is just this: I possess a given concept *C* if and only if I am able to exercise *C* in *my* thoughts. This answer is not very informative, however; for under what conditions can I exercise a concept in my thoughts? Given the phenomenon of partial understanding, the ability to exercise a concept in thought does not require full mastery of the concept. But this ability surely does require at least partial understanding of the concept. And once one has at least a partial understanding, one can employ the concept in thought. So, another answer to the above question is: I possess the concept *C* if and only if I have at least a partial understanding of *C*. On this intuitively attractive view, one cannot possess the concept *fortnight*, for example, unless one grasps that a fortnight is a period of time. Similarly, one cannot possess the ordinary concept *red* unless one grasps that red is a color.

A stronger requirement on concept possession is given by Gareth Evans' Generality Constraint (1982). A simple way to state the constraint, idealizing away from limitations imposed by short-term memory and attention, is as follows: for any concepts a thinker possesses, the thinker can think any thought that can be formed from those concepts. This constraint places a necessary condition on concept possession and it is compatible with the above proposals so long as I am capable of exercising a concept *C* in my thoughts only if I am capable of thinking any thoughts that can be formed from combining *C* with other concepts I possess. Those who hold that thought is systematic and productive will happily grant this; but not everyone will accede to such a requirement.

It might be objected that I can possess concepts that are available *only* for use in experience (on a conceptualist view of experience) so that not all my concepts need be ones that I am capable of exercising in thought. But if experience is conceptual, it must be capable of standing as a reason for belief and the subject of each experience must be capable of appreciating its justificatory role, of inferring the content of the belief from the content of the experience. So, the subject must be capable of exercising concepts in thought that are deployed in experience after all.

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2. For other uses of the term 'concept', and a helpful discussion of nonconceptual content, see Byrne forthcoming.

## II. The thesis of nonconceptual content

What, then, is it for an experience *E* to have a nonconceptual content? The usual answer is as follows: first, *E* must have correctness conditions; secondly, it need not be the case that the subject *S* of the experience *E* has the concepts used in a canonical specification of the correctness conditions for *E*.

The first condition ensures that the experience has a representational content. If things are (or are not) the way they seem to the subject of the experience in undergoing it, then the experience is (or is not) accurate. The way things seem to the subject is the representational content of the experience.

The second condition is the one relevant to *nonconceptual* content. The first point to note here about this condition is that it does not preclude the nonconceptual content of an experience from being the content of a thought of another subject. For what makes the content nonconceptual for subject *S* is simply the fact that *S* need not herself have the relevant concepts and thus need not herself be in a position to form the relevant thought. Moreover, the nonconceptual content of an experience *E* of a subject *S* can even be the content of a thought of *S*, given the above thesis. All that is required in such a case is that *S* need not possess the pertinent concepts to undergo the experience: thus, were *S* to lose the concepts and with them the capacity to have such a thought, that would not preclude her from having the experience, if the content of the experience is nonconceptual.

It appears, then, that, given the usual understanding of the thesis of nonconceptual content, *as far as the nature of content itself goes*, there need be no distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content. All the thesis, as usually stated, requires is that experiences be contentful *nonconceptual states*, where a contentful nonconceptual state is a contentful state, the tokening of which does not involve the exercise of concepts.

We see therefore that the original thesis of nonconceptual content for experiences leaves open three possibilities: (1) experiences are nonconceptual states having conceptual contents (and thus are the same as thoughts along the content dimension only); (2) experiences are nonconceptual states having fine-grained nonconceptual contents (and thus are similar to thoughts along the content dimension); (3) experiences are nonconceptual states having coarse-grained contents (*robustly* nonconceptual contents, as I shall call them).

	CONCEPTUAL STATE	CONCEPTUAL CONTENT
CONCEPTUAL CONTENT	Experiences are just like thoughts along both dimensions.	Experiences share contents with thoughts.
FINE-GRAINED NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENT		Experiences have contents similar to thoughts.
COARSE-GRAINED NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENT		My proposal falls here.

Since conceptual contents have fine-grained individuation conditions, those philosophers who embrace nonconceptualism for visual experience and who opt for alternative (1) above face the following very awkward question: how can an experience  $E$  of a subject  $S$  have a fine-grained content without being built from concepts? Those philosophers who embrace nonconceptualism and who opt for alternative (2) face the same awkward question and a further one, namely: how can an experience  $E$  of a subject  $S$  have a fine-grained content without that content being conceptual?<sup>3</sup> Perhaps these questions can be answered adequately, but I am skeptical. Accordingly, in my view, the advocate of nonconceptual content should embrace alternative (3) (or better a slightly more cautious formulation of alternative (3), namely that contentful experiences have contents that are robustly nonconceptual and, *insofar as* they have such contents, they are nonconceptual states<sup>4</sup>). For the remainder of the essay, this is the alternative I shall endorse.

But what is the robustly nonconceptual content of an experience? One answer is that such a content is a set of possible worlds. Another answer is that each robustly nonconceptual content is a possible state of affairs built out of worldly entities. Of these two answers, I accept the second, since it fits best with my views on the transparency of experience (Tye 1995, 2000, 2003). But for the purposes of the rest of this paper it will not matter whether the former unstructured account of content is preferred to the latter structured one.

On the structured account, it is plausible to break down the relevant possible states of affairs into two basic types: 1) structured complexes of specific particular items, properties, and relations; 2) structured existential states of affairs involving properties and relations (and plausibly the subject of the experience). Suppose, for example, I see the facing surface  $S$  of an object  $O$  and it looks red to me. My visual experience intuitively represents  $S$  as having the property of being red. At this level, my experience is accurate if and only if  $S$  is red. But my experience also has something important in common with certain other visual experiences not directed at  $S$ . Suppose, for example, that  $O$  is replaced with another object  $O'$  that looks just like  $O$  or that I am hallucinating a red surface so that phenomenally it is for me just as it is in seeing  $S$ . Intuitively, in all three cases, it seems to me that *there is* a red surface before me. At this phenomenal level, my experience is accurate if and only if there is a red surface before me.<sup>5</sup> This content is existential, not involving  $S$ , though it does also include the subject of the experience.

The structured account delivers *coarse-grained* contents in that representations with such contents (unlike representations having conceptual contents) cannot represent the same particulars, properties, and relations arranged in the same possible object-involving states of affairs or the same properties and relations involved in the same possible existential states of affairs and yet differ in content. On the unstructured account, coarseness of grain follows from the fact that sameness of content is guaranteed by sameness of correctness conditions in all possible worlds. The two accounts do not yield the same degree of coarseness of grain in robustly nonconceptual contents. For one thing, some may wish to deny that necessarily co-instantiated properties (and relations) are identical; and this view generates differences in content on the structured account

3. Relatedly, why *couldn't* such a fine-grained content be the content of some thought?

4. It is consistent with this claim that some experiences have conceptual contents too.

5. In reality, of course, things will be much more complex than is indicated in this statement of correctness conditions. The existential content for the case in which I see surface  $S$  will involve not just red but a determinate shade of red, a surface orientation, distance away of the apparent surface, 2-D location relative to the viewer, etc.

that do not exist on the unstructured one. For another, on the structured account, some necessarily co-obtaining states of affairs can differ even if necessarily co-instantiated properties (and relations) are identical. Consider, for example, the object-involving state of affairs of  $X$ 's being red and the necessarily co-obtaining state of affairs of there being exactly one actual  $F$  that is red, where 'actual' is understood as a rigidifier and  $X$  is the actual  $F$ . These states of affairs differ in their structure and thus are different possible contents, on the structured account, but there is no difference in content on the unstructured alternative. The upshot is that the unstructured account is more coarse-grained than the structured one.

One worry that might be raised for my endorsement of the coarse-grained option is that it does not fit well with what historically was the central motivation for supposing that visual experiences have nonconceptual contents, namely the fine-grained character of our experiences of shades of color. To this I reply that considerations other than the experience of color shades can be used to motivate the nonconceptualist view of experience and further that it can be true both that there is a fineness of grain to our experiences of shades of color and that color experiences have coarse-grained contents. The first part of this reply is the topic of the next section. I return to the second in Section IV.

### III. Motivations for the thesis of nonconceptual content

I begin with the case of perceptual experiences with an evaluative character. Suppose you are walking towards the Plaza Hotel in New York and just before you get there, you encounter a large quantity of vomit on the sidewalk. You are appalled, of course. Why didn't someone clean it up? Afternoon tea is waiting for you at the hotel and you no longer feel like eating. The vomit smells bad to you. In so doing, it elicits in you an olfactory experience directed on the vomit and its odor. Your experience represents the odor of the vomit as bad. But it does not just represent the odor as bad simpliciter. It represents the odor as bad in a certain way, namely as foul. Your experience, then, has an evaluative content. It represents the vomit and its odor as having a kind of negative value, as being foul.<sup>6</sup>

Must one have the capacity to think a thought into which the concept *foul* enters in order for something to smell foul to one? Surely not. While it is certainly true that the perceptual concept *foul* is typically acquired by exposure to foul smells, intuitively it is not a necessary condition of those smells smelling foul to one that one already have the concept *foul*. In this connection, it is worth noting that new born babies react to Q-tips dipped in sulfur and held beneath their noses by grimacing and turning away. The obvious explanation for their doing so is that the sulfur smells foul to them. But that surely does not require that they already have the concept *foul*. They may well be built so as to acquire the concept *foul* via such encounters, but they do not have the concept the first time something smells foul to them. A plausible hypothesis, then, is that the experience of something's smelling foul has a nonconceptual representational content.

Consider the other side of the coin for a moment. A child as young as two months, upon tasting a little chocolate, typically behaves in a way that signifies that he/she wants more. The child will open and close its lips, push forward towards the chocolate, look happy. Why? The answer is that the chocolate tastes good. *That's* why the child wants more. The child's gustatory expe-

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6. This value is not a moral value, of course.

rience represents a certain taste and the child experiences that taste as good. The taste is experienced as good by the child in that the child undergoes an overall experience which represents the presence of the taste in the mouth and represents it as good. Intuitively, this is not a cognitive response. It does not require its subject to possess evaluative concepts.

I turn next to the case of emotional experiences. Emotional experiences are typically directed at things or persons. Suppose that you walk into the territory of an angry dog. The hair on the dog's neck is standing upright; the dog is growling at you and baring its teeth. In these circumstances, you experience fear and your feel is directed at the dog. Why? Well, the dog *seems* threatening or dangerous to you. That is how the dog is presented to you in your experience. It is part and parcel of your experience of fear. Your experience, then, in part represents the dog as having a value, that of being threatening or dangerous. In my view, your experience also represents various bodily changes in you; for you feel your heart rate increasing, your legs going weak, your blood pressure rising. But these will not be our main focus here.

Now we know that there is an important connection between the amygdala—a small, almond shaped structure, located far beneath the surfaces of the two hemispheres—and emotional experience (Davis 1992; LeDoux 1992; Damasio 1994, 1999). The amygdala is very basic and ancient, and by way of it, the brain is wired to detect dangers both of a sort commonly encountered by our distant ancestors and of a sort we learn about as individuals today. It is also centrally implicated in the experience of anger. For example, removal of the amygdala in monkeys produces a total lack of anger and fear.

The amygdala processes information via subcortical pathways that allow for faster transmission than is found in the cerebral hemispheres (within which thought and decision-making occur). It thus permits us “to begin to respond to dangerous stimuli before we fully know what the stimulus is” (LeDoux 1996). This obviously has immediate survival value. The rat that has to take the time to form an appropriate sequence of thoughts before acting in the face of a cat about to pounce is a dead rat. Not so the rat that is wired to feel fear automatically in response to certain large moving shapes, of which the shape of the cat is one.

If the basic experience of fear is traceable to the operation of the amygdala and the amygdala operates without conceptual activity, then it seems that the experience of fear can occur and with it the representation of the value of being dangerous without its subject possessing the concept *dangerous* (or the concept *threatening*). And if this is so, then on my version of nonconceptualism, *some* emotional experiences (though certainly not all) have robustly non-conceptual evaluative contents. Accordingly, evaluative properties can enter into the possible states of affairs that are robustly nonconceptual contents of experiences (on the structured version of the view).

I come next to the case of experiences of pain and pleasure. The *International Association for the Study of Pain* defines pain as “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage” (in the journal *Pain*, 1986). The view that pain has distinct sensory and affective/emotional components, subserved by different neural mechanisms, was first proposed by Melzack and Casey in 1968, and in the thirty or so years since then it has been shown to be well motivated by both a wealth of clinical data and neuroscientific evidence.<sup>7</sup>

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7. For useful summaries here see Melzack and Wall 1983, Price 1999.

Normally, in a pain experience, both components are present. But in some cases, the affective component is missing. For example, people who undergo prefrontal leukotomies (operations that sever the neural connections in the deep white matter in the frontal lobes) as a last resort for their intractable, constant, severe pain are typically cheerful and relaxed afterwards. They report still having pains, but they no longer *mind* them.

Similar reports come from people suffering pain who are under hypnotic suggestion or nitrous oxide. Such cases of “reactive disassociation”, as Dennett (1978) calls them, are ones in which the distinctive sensory dimension of pain is present but the aversive component is gone. Is pain itself still present? It seems so. The patients *say* that they continue to feel pain. I see no reason not to take these reports at face value. What they show, I suggest, is that pain is not *essentially* an aversive experience.

In any event, a *typical* pain experience has both a sensory and an affective dimension. Consider first the sensory side of pain. I have argued elsewhere (Tye 2003; Tye forthcoming) that pains are experiences that represent tissue damage in bodily parts. Phantom limb pains are experiences whose subjects hallucinate the relevant bodily parts. The case of phantom limb pain is thus one of experiential misrepresentation. Similarly, with referred pain. One can feel a pain in the left arm, when there is nothing wrong with the arm, the cause of the experience being a disturbance in the heart. Such a pain intuitively is inaccurate or misleading; for without additional information, on the basis of the pain, one would be disposed to nurse the arm, to rub it, to believe that something is awry in the arm itself. The obvious explanation again is that there is experiential misrepresentation. Here the bodily part exists, but the case is one in which the subject is under an illusion. Her experience represents (in part) that there is tissue damage at a certain bodily location, when in reality the damage is elsewhere in the body.

Consider next the affective dimension of pain. Pain is normally very unpleasant. People in pain try to get rid of it or to diminish it. Why? The answer surely is because pain *feels* unpleasant or bad, because it is *experienced* as such. Badness, then, or aptness to harm is part of the representational content of pain. Pain experiences represent tissue damage and further represent such damage as bad for their subjects. But this surely does not require all those who experience pain to have the concept *bad* or *apt to harm*. Intuitively, we do not need to be able to think thoughts in order for pains to feel bad to us. The most plausible view is that we are hard-wired by nature to experience pain as bad. Pain experiences, then, have nonconceptual contents.

For another example, consider orgasm. Orgasm is a bodily sensation, but it is not only that. The most natural description of an orgasm, and indeed of any pleasant experience is “It feels good.” One’s orgasm represents a certain change in the region of the genitals as good for one, as something apt to benefit, not to harm one.<sup>8</sup> Intuitively, that isn’t a conceptual response. One cannot help but feel the relevant bodily disturbance except as good.

These reflections naturally lead to a general proposal that nature wired into us (and many other creatures) value-tracking detectors—detectors that enable us to track value in a primitive way and thereby to behave in a fashion most conducive to our survival. This proposal is one that the psychologist J. J. Gibson would have endorsed. In Gibson’s view, we directly perceive affordances, and affordances are values. For example, according to Gibson, the tree looks good

8. The suggestion that the pleasingness of orgasms is part of their representational content is made in Tye 1995a. It is also the view taken by William Seager (forthcoming).

to climb to the squirrel whereas it looks good to perch on for the bird. The squirrel and the bird are directly aware of different affordances.

I come next to some inference patterns that seem to me to support the nonconceptualist thesis (and in this instance my version of it in particular). Suppose

I feel a pain in a leg

is true. It does not follow that

There is a leg in which I feel a pain

is true. For the case could be one of phantom limb pain. Suppose now

I feel a pain in my right thigh

and

My right thigh is the body part of mine that was bitten by a snake

are both true. From these two claims, we *may* infer that

I feel a pain in the body part of mine that was bitten by a snake

is true.

Why is it that the first inference is invalid but the second valid? Why is exportation unsafe with respect to ‘a leg’ in the first inference but substitution of co-referential terms safe in the second inference? The answer, I suggest, is that pain experiences represent, but not in the manner of thoughts or beliefs. Pain experiences are representations—hence they can represent a leg when there is no leg—but they have a coarse-grained nonconceptual content—hence substitution of co-referential terms for bodily parts is permissible.

Another motivation for the nonconceptualist thesis is provided by the phenomenon of concept acquisition. Human beings acquire many general concepts via perceptual experience. How is this possible? If the world pre-conceptually really were a “blooming, buzzing confusion”, as William James supposed, then it is utterly mysterious how we could acquire color and shape concepts from our experience. By contrast, if the world is already presented to us, at a nonconceptual level, as being made up of three-dimensional surfaces of varying colors and shapes, it is easy to understand how we can come to conceptualize the world via color and shape concepts.

All but one of the above motivations are intended to motivate the *general* nonconceptualist thesis rather than my coarse-grained version of it. However, to the extent that the questions I posed earlier for the alternative versions of that thesis have no satisfactory answers, the above considerations all count in favor of my proposal. There is one further point worth making here. Simplicity favors my version of the nonconceptualist view. Given that there are conceptual states with conceptual contents, for example, thoughts, and further that, at a subpersonal level, there are nonconceptual states with coarse-grained nonconceptual contents (for example, states in the visual system that represent changes of light intensity or zero-crossings), why introduce

a further category of states that are nonconceptual but that have conceptual or fine-grained non-conceptual contents? There is no need to complicate things in this way.

I return in the next section to the issue of fineness of grain in color shade experiences. As I mentioned earlier, fineness of grain historically was an extremely important motivation for the nonconceptualist view (Evans 1982). Let us consider next whether it really is the case that our visual experiences represent the world with a determinacy of detail that is not capturable conceptually in the experiences.

#### IV. Conceptualist accounts of fineness of grain

Some philosophers claim that the determinacy of detail in visual experience *can* be captured by concepts at play in the experiences. What is needed, according to the first conceptualist view I shall consider, is simply the acknowledgment, in the case of color experience, that some of our color concepts pick out minimal shades of color. This is one view adopted by McDowell in *Mind and World*.<sup>9</sup> He comments: “What is in play here is a recognitional capacity, possibly quite short-lived ...” (p. 57). McDowell’s thought, elucidated more clearly in a subsequent symposium on *Mind and World*<sup>10</sup>, is that there is a recognitional capacity that persists for a little while *after* an experience of the shade recognized and thus a recognitional concept is exercised. More specifically, according to McDowell, the conceptual content

This is colored (with) *S*

is in the content of the experience, where *S* is a general recognitional concept of a fine-sliced shade.

This is not convincing. Human memory is limited. We abstract away from details to avoid information overload. We have recognitional concepts such as *red*, *green*, *blue*, and more specific ones such as *scarlet*, and *bright scarlet*. But we do not have recognitional concepts for minimal shades. The recognitional capacities to which McDowell adverts simply do not exist. The ordinary person cannot recognize red<sub>27</sub>, even after having just seen it. People who are shown a patch of color and then very shortly afterwards are asked whether a second patch has the same shade of color or a minimally different one do not do well at the task.<sup>11</sup> Of course, if the original patch is re-presented *before* the original experience is over—and that will not be until roughly 1/3 of a second or so after the original patches are removed, given Sperling’s data—then the match will be made successfully. But this does not show a recognitional capacity. For that requires the capacity to recognize the given hue when it comes again *after* the initial experience ends.<sup>12</sup>

9. I say one view here, since there seem to be two different views on offer in *Mind and World*, the second of which will occupy us shortly.

10. In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1998.

11. See here Hurvich 1981; Halsey and Chapanis 1951. Also Raffman 1995.

12. Another objection is that there cannot be recognition for a *first-time* experience of a property; but that experience still has a specific representational content: the world still appears a certain way to the subject of the experience (Peacocke 2001).

A second reply the conceptualist might make to the alleged fineness of grain in visual experience is to allow that the subject of an experience of a minimal shade lacks a general recognitional concept of that shade, but to insist that it does not follow that the experience has a nonconceptual content, since the subject can conceptualize the given shade in the experience via a general, fine-grained perceptual concept that the subject is hard-wired to exercise in the given situation.

Such a 'concept' is one that never enters memory. The subject possesses the concept, on one natural way of understanding the above proposal, by having a hard-wired disposition to exercise the concept in certain circumstances. This, however, seems very implausible. In general, the disposition to exercise a concept in certain circumstances does not confer the ability to exercise the concept in one's thoughts. For example, Frank Jackson's Mary, while in her black and white room, does not possess *phenomenal* concepts of a sort the rest of us exercise in our introspective awareness of experiences of the various hues, since she does not know what it is like to experience the hues. And not knowing this, she does not have any understanding of the relevant phenomenal concepts. So, she is not capable of thinking thoughts into which such phenomenal concepts enter. But Mary in her room *does* have the disposition to exercise those concepts in classifications she makes of how objects appear to her if and when she sees objects with the various hues.

One way to try to handle this difficulty is to insist that the relevant, general, fine-grained concepts are possessed only at the times of their exercise. They are automatically manufactured on the spot, as the subject undergoes the experiences; the concepts are then lost as soon as the experiences are over. The obvious trouble with this view is that if such concepts occur in the subject's experiences then they must be concepts the subject possesses and hence concepts that the subject is capable of exercising in thought. But if these concepts can occur in the subject's thoughts as well as in her experiences, and they really are general concepts, then the subject should be able to think thoughts that use the concepts even when the experiences are not present; and this conflicts with the hypothesis that the relevant concepts are lost once the experiences end.

Here is another problem. Suppose that I am viewing a colored patch and that my visual experience conceptually represents this patch as red<sub>25</sub>. Suppose further that my experience is not fleeting: I am staring at the patch for a considerable length of time. While my experience lasts, can I think to myself a thought which exercises this concept, for example, the thought that I am seeing something with shade red<sub>25</sub>? It seems to me that the only thoughts I can form at such a time about red<sub>25</sub> have a demonstrative content. I can mentally 'point' at the shade I am experiencing. I can think of it as that shade or that shade of red or perhaps just that. But, if my thoughts here *seem* to me to have a demonstrative content, then, given that I have privileged access to the contents of my thoughts (that I can know via introspection alone what I am thinking<sup>13</sup>), they do have such content. It seems, then, that I cannot think the thought that I am seeing red<sub>25</sub>, from which it follows that I do not possess the general concept red<sub>25</sub>. And if I do not possess this concept, then I cannot exercise it in *my* visual experience.

This brings me to the third reply that the conceptualist might make, namely to suggest that the concept for a shade employed by visual experience is indeed demonstrative. The obvious

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13. Assuming my faculty of introspection is working properly. For more on privileged access, see McLaughlin and Tye 1998.

immediate question for this reply is: what form does the demonstrative concept in the experience take? McDowell, also in *Mind and World*, appeals to the demonstrative *that shade*. To experience a particular shade, red<sub>27</sub>, say, is to have an experience of something as being of that shade, where the latter is to be understood as involving the application of the concept *that shade* to red<sub>27</sub>. On this view, seeing a shade is the same as or at least to be modeled on seeing something *as* having that shade.

The difference, then, between seeing red<sub>27</sub> and red<sub>28</sub> is the difference between applying the concept *that shade* to red<sub>27</sub> and applying it to red<sub>28</sub>. The concept *that shade*, in the context of the one experience, refers to red<sub>27</sub>; the concept *that shade*, in the context of the other experience, refers to red<sub>28</sub>. The two experiences thereby have different correctness conditions and thus different contents.

This is problematic, as has been noted by several philosophers (but most forcefully by Peacocke 1998, 2001). First, which concept exactly is exercised in the experience of a particular shade of red? The concept McDowell appeals to is the concept *that shade*. But why not *that shade of red*? Or *that color*? Or *that red*? There seems no non-arbitrary way of deciding between these candidates—they all seem equally eligible—and thus no fact of the matter as to which one is applied in the experience. It appears, then, that the problem of differences of grain between conceptual resources and experience of shades is genuine but opposite to that envisaged by Evans. For now we have too many available concepts for each shade rather than too many shade experiences for each available concept.

Secondly, McDowell's proposal appeals to a demonstrative concept that uses a general sortal, *shade*. The latter is a recognitional concept. The idea that in order to undergo an experience of a particular shade of red, something a very small child can do, from a very early age, one must possess the concept *shade*, is absurd. To possess the concept *shade*, one must possess a cognitive grasp of the difference between a shade and a color that is not a shade, classifying red<sub>27</sub> as a shade, for example, and red as not. It seems to me quite likely that some high schoolers do not grasp the concept *shade*!

One way to handle these problems is to appeal to a pure demonstrative *that*. In connection with this possibility, Peacocke (2001, 246) comments:

Someone could be introduced to the general concept timbre, applicable to sounds, by his first having an experience leading him to judge, "That's beautiful", referring specifically to the timbre of, say, a clarinet. It may be that our listener only later applies the concept timbre to the instance he had already perceived and thought about. ('That sound' could be too unspecific to capture what he experienced as beautiful.)

But what is the referent of the demonstrative in the color case? The obvious answer is: the particular shade. *Which* shade? Suppose I am viewing a color patch with the shade red<sub>18</sub>. Pointing at the patch and the shade, on the basis of my experience, I say, "That has that shade". Should we suppose that the concept *that*, exercised in the experience with respect to a shade, refers via a sample of the shade, namely the shade of the patch the subject is viewing? Then, on the sample view, both my remark and my experience are accurate. However, if I am *misperceiving* the patch and experiencing it as having a shade different from the one it actually has, then my experience will not represent the patch as having *that*, understood as the actual shade of the patch, at all. So, the content of my experience cannot be demonstrative.

The conceptualist might respond that, whatever may be the case for the demonstrative *expression*, ‘that shade’, the demonstrative concept exercised in the *experience* is a concept of the shade the given surface *appears* to have. But now in the case of misperception, there is no sample of the color in the world. So, how is the referent of the concept fixed? The obvious reply is that it is fixed by the content of the subject’s experience: the concept refers to the shade the given experience represents the surface as having. However, this reply is not available to the conceptualist about the content of visual experience; for the content of the demonstrative concept is supposed to be *part* of the content of the experience and so the concept cannot have its referent fixed by that content (Heck 2000, 496).<sup>14</sup>

There is a further problem. Consider the case of shape. Suppose you and I are both viewing the same shape. The concept *that*, in this case, refers to the shape. But suppose you experience it as a square and I experience it as a regular diamond so that there is a difference in how things appear, in the contents of our experiences. That difference hasn’t been captured by appeal to the demonstrative here.

The conclusion to which we are drawn is that conceptualism cannot account for determinacy of detail in color (and shape) experiences. These experiences represent the world with a determinacy of detail that goes beyond any concepts available for use in the experiences. In this way, color (and shape) experiences are fine-grained.

On my version of nonconceptualism, this is accounted for by supposing that color (and shape) experiences have robustly nonconceptual contents. Thus, on the structured version of this view, determinate shades of color (and shapes) enter into these contents. The contents themselves have coarse-grained individuation conditions in the sense explained earlier. Coarseness of grain of this sort is clearly compatible with fineness of grain in color shades (or shapes) represented.

## V. Squares and diamonds

Peacocke (in 2001) says:

We will not do justice to the ... phenomenology of experience if we restrict ourselves to those contents which can be built up by referring to the properties and relations which the perceived objects are represented by the experiences as possessing. We must, in describing the fine-grained phenomenology, make use of the notion of the *way* in which some property or relation is given in the experience. (240)

He continues:

The same shape can be perceived in two different ways, and the same holds for shape properties, if we regard them as within the representational content of experience. Mach’s ex-

14. One nonconceptualist, Chris Peacocke, does not notice this problem. As a result, in a recent essay (1998), he comments, “Since these unsupplemented perceptual-demonstratives exist, and can pick out fine-grained properties, the anti-conceptualist should not try to rest his case on fineness of grain” (p. 610). This concession seems to me too hasty.

ample of one and the same shape that can be perceived either as a square or as a regular diamond is a familiar example ... an object can be perceived either as a square, or as a diamond, in either of the standard orientations relative to the perceiver. (241)

In these passages, Peacocke is trying to make a case for adopting a view of nonconceptual content for experience that is itself fine-grained. According to Peacocke, we need to introduce ways properties are presented in experience in order to account fully for the phenomenology. In this concluding section, I want to consider the case of squares and diamonds in detail and along with it Peacocke's argument for a fine-grained approach to nonconceptual content.

First, does it really make clear sense to talk of the way a shape is presented in experience or the way a color is presented (as Peacocke does)? We may happily allow, of course, that if something looks red, say, it looks a certain way, namely red. But the way here is the way the *thing* looks. Redness, the property, is not experienced as being given in a certain way (other than as belonging to the thing).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, I would say, for the case of shape. The shape, squareness, viewed as a universal, is not presented in experience in any particular way. Individual squares are so presented.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, each such square—each particular—is, in one sense, a colored shape. But it is only relative to this use of 'shape' that it is uncontroversial that shapes can be presented in different ways in experience. Thus, viewing a figure, I can experience its shape as a regular diamond, say, as Peacocke asserts, and not as a square only insofar as *the figure* is presented to me in experience as regular diamond-shaped (and not as square). The figure, in looking regular diamond-shaped, to me looks a certain way. This way is not a way a shape property looks.

Let us leave this point and look more closely at the square/diamond example. Peacocke holds that the fine-grained view of nonconceptual content is necessitated by a proper account of this and other such examples.<sup>17</sup> But why?

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15. It might be held that where there is an inverted spectrum, red is given in experience something other than the normal way. However, I deny this. To one who has an inverted spectrum, red things do not appear red. They appear green. So, red itself is not given in experience to the invert in any way. Red things are so given. They are given as green. Of course, this commits me to holding that color inversions are a form of misperception, but this seems to me the correct view (both for the standard inverted spectrum case and for the more *recherché* versions). For more here, see my 2000, chapters 4 and 5. There is another possible account of color inversions worth mentioning, namely that red things are experienced as red by the invert, but they are also experienced as having another surface quality which makes the redness of those things manifest, and this quality is different from the one that makes redness manifest for normals. On this view, there is no misperception with respect to the color of red things. But equally, there is no need to countenance ways, considered as entities distinct from properties and relations; for the qualities now grounding color inversions are qualities of things.

16. In general, in my view, it is a mistake to model our awareness of qualities on our awareness of particulars. When we see particulars, they look various ways to us but the qualities of which we are conscious in seeing these particulars do not look any way. Our awareness of the relevant qualities is direct. It involves *no* mode of presentation. To suppose otherwise is to take the first step down the slippery path that leads to the thesis of revelation with respect to the qualities we experience (the thesis that the nature of such qualities is fully revealed to us in experience). And the thesis of revelation is a philosophical thesis (not a thesis of commonsense) and one that (by my lights) generates a world view that is clearly unacceptable.

17. Again, I want to stress that the above discussion of demonstratives does *not* undercut the view that the fineness of grain in visual experience can be represented conceptually in *demonstrative judgements* or

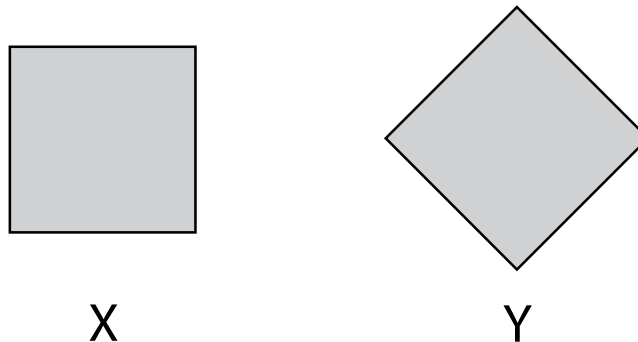
The reasoning seems to be as follows. The property of being a square is the same as the property of being a regular diamond.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the robustly nonconceptual content that *X* is square is the same as the robustly nonconceptual content that *X* is a regular diamond. However, there is a difference between how *X* looks, when *X* looks square, and how *X* looks, when *X* looks regular diamond-shaped (or vice-versa). This phenomenological difference, Peacocke believes, is one that cannot be accounted for by appeal to robustly nonconceptual content.

To see what is wrong with this argument, consider the following parallel argument. The way something looks, when it looks square is different from the way it feels, when it feels square by touch. The same property—squareness—is represented in both cases. So, the robustly nonconceptual content of the experience of *X*'s looking square is the same as the robustly nonconceptual content of the experience of *X*'s feeling square by touch. So, the phenomenological difference between the way *X* looks and the way *X* feels by touch cannot be captured solely via appeal to robustly nonconceptual content.

The standard way of responding to the second argument is to note that when something looks square, many other properties are represented in addition to squareness—properties not represented when something feels square by touch. For example, the color of the object is represented, its distance away, its two-dimensional location relative to the eyes. In the haptic case, the shape is represented as belonging to a surface with which one is in bodily contact; the temperature of the surface is represented; there is a more detailed representation of the degree of solidity.

In similar fashion, I maintain that when something looks square, certain properties are represented that are not represented when the same thing looks regular diamond-shaped (or vice-versa). This can be brought out as follows.

Consider first the case below of two different figures, one of which looks square and the other of which looks regular diamond-shaped:



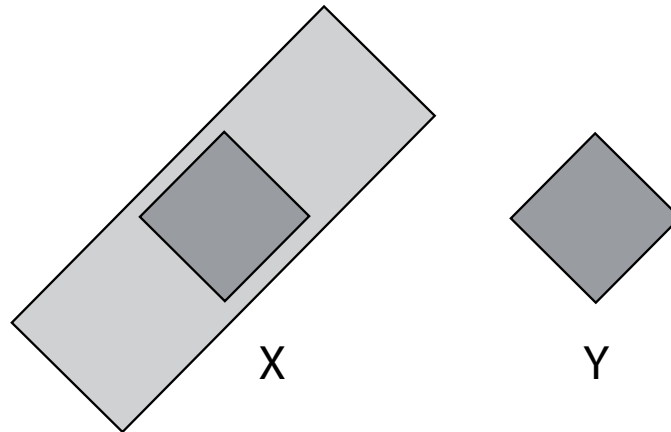
*Example 1*

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*thoughts* made on the basis of experience. What I have argued is that the *visual experiences themselves* do not represent details *via* demonstrative concepts.

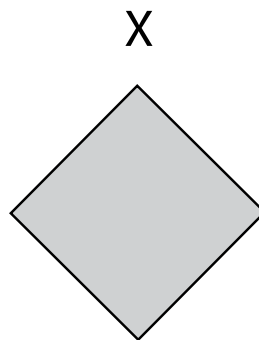
18. This claim is very plausible and I shall not challenge it in what follows. (I have contested it elsewhere (Tye 2003, 173-4), but I now prefer the response below.)

Here it is obvious that there is a difference in the (viewer-relative) properties represented in the two cases. For example, *X* looks to be resting on a side; *Y* does not. *Y* looks to be standing or balanced on a point; *X* does not. *X* looks to have two vertical sides; *Y* does not. *X* looks to have two horizontal sides; *Y* does not. *Y* looks to have inclined sides; *X* does not.



Example 2

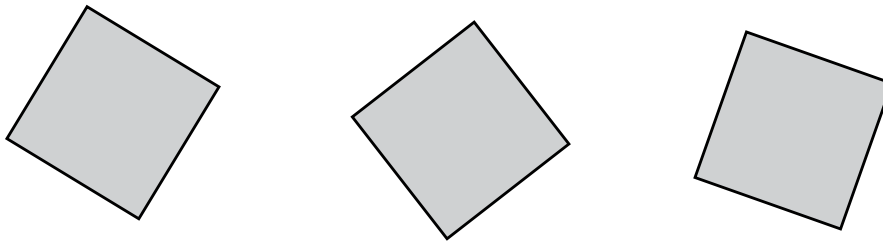
In this example, the square, *X*, inside the rectangle on the left, can look square. When it does so, it looks different from the figure, *Y*, on the right. Here again, there is a difference in (viewer-relative) properties represented. When *X* looks square, *X* looks to have an inclined base; *Y* does not. In such circumstances, *X* looks tilted; *Y* does not. *Y* looks upright; *X* does not.



Example 3

In this example, we have a single figure, *X*, that can look either square or regular diamond-shaped. If *X* looks square, *X* looks to have an inclined base. *X* then looks tilted. If *X* looks diamond-shaped, *X* looks upright. So, when *X* looks square, *X* is represented as having the property of being tilted; this property is not represented as belonging to *X* when *X* looks diamond-shaped.

Note that when something looks tilted, it can look tilted at a variety of orientations (see below); but in each such case, the figure is represented as having the property of being tilted.



Chris Peacocke has objected to this proposal on two grounds (in a recent commentary). First, figures such as *X* in example 3 above can sometimes look square without looking tilted, as when one sees an appropriate pattern of floor tiles. Secondly, the appeal to tilt as a ground of the phenomenal difference between looking square and looking regular diamond-shaped ignores the role symmetry is agreed to play by psychologists in such experiences.

Consider the second point first. For a symmetrical figure such as a square, tilt goes with a certain sort of symmetry, namely symmetry about an axis bisecting two opposite sides. If the figure, *X*, looks tilted 45 degrees to the right (left), it looks symmetrical about an axis inclined 45 degrees to the right (left) and bisecting two of its sides. If *X* looks upright, as it does if it looks regular diamond-shaped, it looks symmetrical about a vertical axis of symmetry, one that bisects two opposite angles. In looking tilted, *X* does not thereby look upright, of course, since the visual experience in this case tracks the first symmetry and not the second. Of course, *X* actually has both symmetries, but the property of being symmetrical about an axis bisecting opposite sides is not necessarily co-instantiated with the property of being symmetrical about an axis bisecting opposite angles. In the case of a vase figure, for example, the figure is symmetrical about an axis that bisects the top and bottom sides of the vase but it is not symmetrical about an axis that bisects two opposite angles.

In the case of the pattern of floor tiles, it seems to me that their looking square, say, at least requires that they look to have a certain symmetry, as Peacocke himself would grant, and the relevant symmetry, I claim, for each tile, is about an axis that bisects two opposite sides and that has a direction (relative to the perceiver) which intuitively is represented in the experience. But if this is so, then (on the nonconceptualist view), contra Peacocke, each tile will automatically look tilted in a certain direction relative to the perceiver.<sup>19</sup>

19. It is also worth stressing that the coarse-grained account I am proposing of the nonconceptual content of experience can account for the rational transition from something's looking square to the judgement that it is square as opposed to the judgement that it is regular diamond-shaped (given the right circumstances), since the thing in question will then look to have certain properties it will not look to have in the case it looks regular diamond-shaped. The nonconceptual representation of these properties in

The conclusion I draw is that the familiar example of squares and diamonds provides no good reason to move away from the view that the nonconceptual content of visual experience is robust.<sup>20</sup>

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the former experience justifies the transition (via a reliable process) to the judgement that a square is present rather than to the judgement concerning a diamond shape.

20. Alex Byrne has suggested to me that although the case of squares and diamonds can be handled in the way I propose, there is another similar case which creates difficulty, namely that in which I experience nine dots first as making up three rows of three and second as making up three columns of three. Here there is a clear phenomenal difference in how the dots look but not one, according to Byrne, that can be handled in terms of a difference in robust nonconceptual content, since the property of making up three rows of three dots is necessarily co-instantiated with the property of making up three columns of three dots. (Of course, this presents a problem for the view that experiences have structured, robustly non-conceptual contents only on the assumption that necessarily co-instantiated properties are identical.)

My reply unsurprisingly is that there are other represented properties in terms of which the difference in content can be drawn. For example, when the dot pattern looks made up of three rows of three dots, it looks divided into three rows. It does not look this way when it looks made up of three columns of three dots. Then it looks divided into three columns. Patently, the property of dividing into three rows is not identical with the property of dividing into three columns (some dot patterns with three rows divide into four columns). Further, in the dot pattern of three rows of three, the bottom three dots appear to compose a row (as do the three dots immediately above them and the three dots immediately above those dots). They do not appear this way when the dot pattern looks made up of columns. Since the property of composing a row is possessed by dots elsewhere that are laid out in a row without there being any columns, it is not the case that the property of composing a row can be redescribed in column terms such that the property, so described, is represented when the dot pattern of nine is experienced as dividing into three columns.

There is a further case mentioned by David Chalmers (forthcoming) which also deserves a quick response. Chalmers asks us to imagine an “El Greco” world in which everything is stretched ten times in one direction but in which structure and dynamics are otherwise the same. In this world, Chalmers says, long thin rectangles look phenomenally square even though the visual experiences they generate, being normally caused by long, thin rectangles, represent them as having a certain sort of rectangularity. This supposedly creates difficulty for any coarse-grained view of the content of experience. There is no real difficulty, however.

Ask someone in the El Greco world to trace out in space the shape of something that looks square to her. What will this person draw? A long, thin rectangle? I think not: kinaesthetic feedback will tell her that cannot be right. A square? Again, I think not: that won’t *look* right. Ask this person to feel out the shape of an object that looks square to her. How will it feel? Will all the sides feel to be the same length? Surely not. In general, touch corrects vision. The stick that looks bent in water no longer looks bent once its shape is felt by hand. So, it is unlikely that the thin rectangle will continue to look square. Why? Obvious answer: because the case is one of shape illusion (or normal misperception and in this respect is like the Müller-Lyer). Accordingly, long, thin rectangles are *not* represented in visual experience in the El Greco world as thin rectangles. They are represented as square.

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