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**Perceptual Experiences, Concepts and the Reasons Behind
our Beliefs.**

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of Master of Arts in Philosophy at Massey University

Kate E. Tappenden

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Introduction

How does perception tell us about the world around us? Do our perceptual experiences represent the world to us? If so, how are they representational? Moreover, how do our perceptual experiences provide the basis for our empirical beliefs?¹ These questions are among those that are central to the philosophy of perception. Let us look at the first one: How does perception tell us about our environment? Many philosophers agree that perception tells us about the way the world is by being representational of the world. This theory of perception is one of many amongst the philosophy of mind that fall under the umbrella of Intentionalism, or representationalism.

Intentionalism

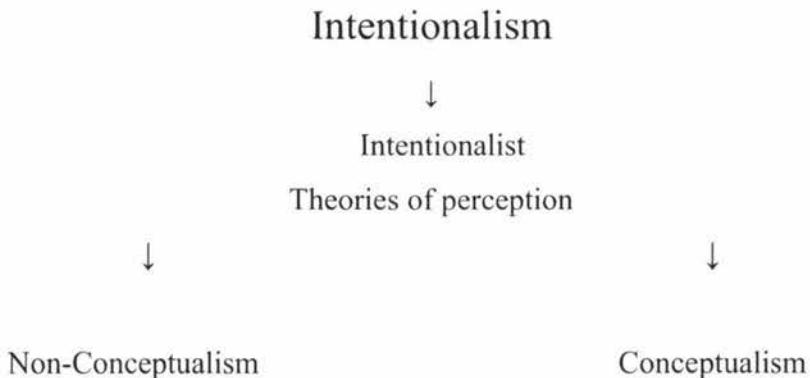


Intentionalist

Theories of perception

However, intentionalist theories of perception differ from each other in certain ways. One prominent point of disagreement is over *how* the content of perception is representational. Some writers claim that perception, like other mental states such as beliefs and desires have *conceptual* contents. That is, their contents are like the contents of thoughts: conceptually structured and dependent upon possession of a conceptual capacity. This is ‘conceptualism’ and these theorists will be called ‘conceptualists.’ There are other writers, however, who deny this claim and argue that the content of perception is non-conceptual. These are the ‘non-conceptualists’ and they advocate ‘non-conceptualism’. Let us first turn to a brief introduction into non-conceptualism.

¹ The way in which one characterises perceptual experience shapes one’s subsequent account of how perceptual experiences cause empirical beliefs. Therefore the answer to the question ‘what is a perceptual experience?’ will largely affect the response to ‘how can perceptual experiences cause beliefs?’ (Why this is the case will be shown in the following discussion.)



Non-Conceptualism

In a nutshell, the non-conceptualist thesis is that there are intentional, representational contents of mental states that do not require their bearer to possess concepts in order for them to be present. These mental states are states with non-conceptual content. A widely discussed mental state that has, on this view, non-conceptual content is perceptual experience. Non-conceptual perceptual experience represents the world as being a certain way and yet does not require the perceiver to possess concepts that characterise the content of her experience.

There are two prominent arguments given in favour of the non-conceptualist's theory of perceptual experience:

- 1) The “Richness Argument” (Heck, 2000). Writers have argued that we can have perceptual experiences that represent worldly things for which we do not possess concepts. Look at all the different shades of colour we can perceive, they proclaim. Clearly, we can perceive many shades that we do not possess concepts for. Christopher Peacocke writes:

There are many dimensions – hue, shape size, direction – such that any value on that dimension may enter the fine-grained content of an experience. In particular, experience is not restricted in its range of possible contents to those points or ranges picked out by concepts – *red, square, straight ahead* – possessed by the perceiver (1992:68).

- 2) The Argument from Evolution. This argument claims that it is likely that perception is primitive and we had the ability to perceive the world around us long before our conceptual linguistic capacities evolved. For this reason, we probably share the non-conceptual operations of our perceptual systems with some animals. Peacocke offers a complex account of the nature of perceptual content. He holds that perception has non-conceptual content mainly because we must be able to

Describe correctly the overlap between human perception and that of some of the non-linguistic animals. While being reluctant to attribute concepts to the lower animals, many of us would also want to insist that the property of (say) representing a flat brown surface as being at a certain distance from one can be common to the perceptions of humans and of lower animals...it is literally the same representational property that the two experiences possess, even if the human experience also has richer representational contents in addition (2001a: 613-614).

In summary, these arguments claim that the content of perceptual experience is non-conceptual and it is not necessary that a perceiver possess the concepts that characterise this content in order for the state to have this type of content. That is, the content of perceptual experience cannot be identified with the content of propositional attitudes. It is non-conceptual. Tim Crane succinctly sums up the non-conceptualist theory of perception: ‘for something, X, to believe that a is F, X must possess the concepts a and F. But for X to merely represent that a is F, X does not have to possess these concepts. It is in the latter case that X is in a state with non-conceptual content’ (1992:141).

As a final note, there are two general approaches to the definition of non-conceptual content. Crane, as shown in the quote above, defines a non-conceptual state in terms

of whether or not concepts need to be possessed in order for it to be entertained. This is also the approach I have taken in this brief section on non-conceptual content. Christopher Peacocke, however, defines non-conceptual content more directly as content with certain types of non-conceptual constituents. This leads him to a more detailed formulation of a theory of non-conceptual content as he attempts to precisely characterise this type of content. Peacocke's theory of non-conceptual content is one of the fundamental positions in this literature and so it is to Peacocke's theory that we will turn below.

Conceptualists such as Bill Brewer and John McDowell have put forward a succession of arguments against the non-conceptualist position; focussing on the notion that the content of perception is non-conceptual. Let us look at conceptualism and briefly examine some of the objections they raise against non-conceptualism.

Conceptualism

The general conceptualist position is that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual: it is composed of concepts and requires the bearer to possess the concepts that characterise them. This conceptual content is a proposition, or thought. Conceptual contents, or propositions, then, are structured by concepts and are representational in virtue of these concepts. Consider this example. The cat hopes the bird is tasty. The content 'the bird is tasty' is composed of the concept 'bird' which, when combined with the predicate 'is tasty', forms a proposition that represents a state of affairs: 'the bird is tasty'. And, to reiterate, possession of the concepts that comprise the content of perceptual experience is required in order to entertain that particular perceptual experience. There are several motivations behind this theory:

- 1) This is a response to the richness argument mentioned above.² The conceptualists hold that an entirely conceptual perceptual experience can in fact accommodate all the detail of a scene. McDowell is the strongest proponent of this argument. In his *Mind and World*, McDowell argues:

In the throes of an experience of the kind that putatively transcends one's conceptual powers – an experience that *ex hypothesi* affords a suitable sample – one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like “that shade”, in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of a sample (1994:57).³

- 2) But the most fundamental argument behind the conceptualist thesis is based on the premise that we must be able to justify our empirical beliefs. That is, we must be able to give reasons for our beliefs about the world. These reasons must necessarily be conceptual. McDowell puts several arguments for why reasons require conceptual contents. Here are two of the main ones:

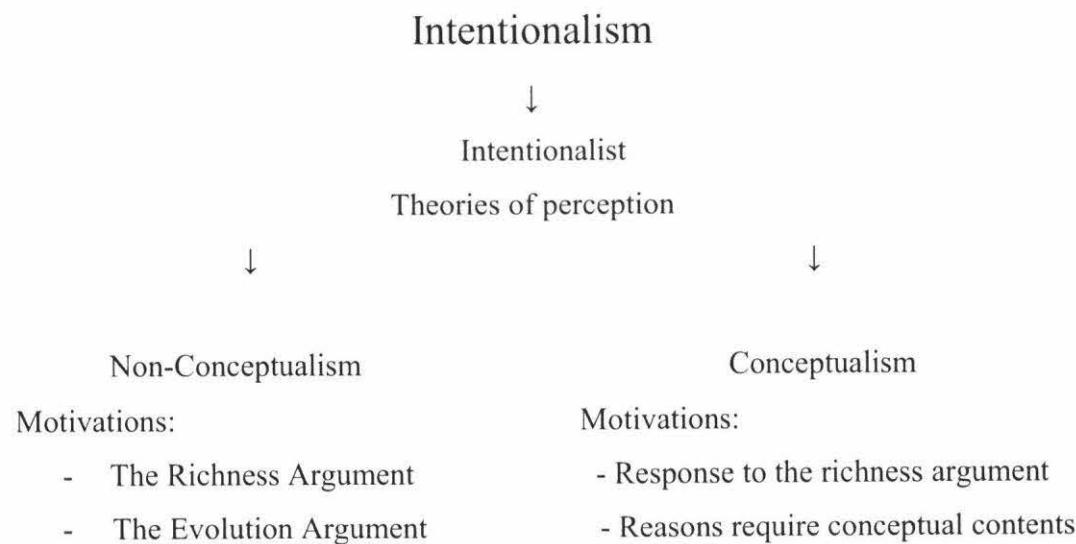
1 - In order for experience to justify belief, a logical, inferential relation must relate experience and belief. Only conceptual contents can stand in this logical relation to beliefs. Experiences do not justify beliefs, Therefore the content of perception is conceptual.

² This argument is that we should hold that perception has a non-conceptual content because we can have perceptual experiences of greater detail than we have concepts to conceptualise and express that detail with. By detail, I mean there may be more spatial features, colour shades or frequencies of sound, for example, in an environment than the perceiver can accommodate using the concepts within her grasp.

³ Demonstrative concepts are concepts such as ‘that shade’ or ‘that spatial feature’, or ‘that sound’. There are several defining conditions of a demonstrative concept. A person can be said to possess a demonstrative concept only if she can, at least for a short time after, correctly apply the concept in the absence of the sample. For example, she might see a colour chart and pick out the colour she likes for a wall and then for a few moments afterwards be able to use that concept correctly in thought and speech. This is what McDowell terms a ‘recognition capacity, possibly quite short lived, that sets in with the experience’ (1994:57).

2 - Reasons must be articulable. Only that which is conceptual is articulable. Therefore, in order for perceptual experience to justify, or provide reasons for, our beliefs perceptual experience must be conceptual.

To sum up, on one hand we have non-conceptualists, such as Peacocke and Crane, who hold that the content of experience is non-conceptual. On the other, we have the conceptualists, such as McDowell and Brewer who maintain that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual.



The arguments in favour of and against conceptualism and non-conceptualism have been the subjects of much debate. Conceptualists have responded to both of the motivations for non-conceptualism, but the non-conceptualists find these responses implausible. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to look beyond the dilemma that arises from the argument that reasons require conceptual contents. The dilemma is this: if reasons do require conceptual contents, then we find ourselves in one of three unattractive positions: (1) we'll be forced to accept the implausibilities that

non-conceptualists claim inherently exist in the idea that conceptual contents alone justify beliefs, (2) we'll be forced to accept the implausibilites that conceptualists claim are present if we hold that non-conceptual experiences justify our beliefs, or (3) we must deny that experiences provide reasons for our beliefs at all. Therefore, in order to shed some light on why this dilemma arises and how we can go some way to resolving it, I will now focus on the debate that has arisen around McDowell's claim that reasons require conceptual contents. Recall that there were two main claims that McDowell makes for why reasons require conceptual contents:

- 1- Only conceptual contents can stand in the necessary logical inferential relation to beliefs.
- 2- Reasons must be articulable. Conceptual contents alone are articulable; therefore if experiences are to provide reasons, they must be conceptual.

Christopher Peacocke, our main non-conceptualist, claims that reasons do not, in fact, require conceptual contents.⁴ He provides arguments for why we should not accept either of McDowell's claims above. In short, Peacocke tackles McDowell's arguments like this:

- 1- In order for experience to justify belief, experience and belief ought to be rationally related. But this relation does not have to be the logical, inferential kind that McDowell maintains it is.
- 2- In response to what he calls McDowell's 'Argument from Articulability', Peacocke argues that reasons do not have to be conceptual in order for them to be articulable.

⁴ Contrary to how it may appear here, Peacocke originally grounded reasons in non-conceptual content (1992: 80). McDowell's later refutation of his argument is a response to this. Peacocke was not, initially, responding to McDowell.

Let us now inspect these two pairs of opposing claims that McDowell and Peacocke have put forward. I will address the first pair of opposing claims - around the relation between experience and belief - because it demonstrates exactly how experience provides reasons for beliefs for each author.

I will then examine the second pair of opposing claims - around whether or not reasons have to be conceptual in order for them to be articulated - for quite a different reason. There is, I think, an interesting point to be made about Peacocke and McDowell's disagreement over this issue. I will show that this particular disagreement rests on an equivocation.

The equivocation stems from the fact that two different theories of concepts are used in the arguments for the opposing positions. I will demonstrate that there is a radical difference between the theories of concepts on either side of this debate. And according to McDowell's theory of concepts we can but conclude that conceptual contents alone are articulable, and by Peacocke's theory of concepts, exactly the opposite must follow.

This debate takes place in some very difficult literature. Therefore, before an inspection of the two sets of opposing claims can begin, the positions of Peacocke and McDowell must be expounded. For clarity's sake, the exegesis that follows of McDowell and Peacocke's theories is in the form of a textual analysis. It is hoped that this textual analysis will provide some clarification of these two major theories and work towards a demonstration of the presence of an equivocation in the 'Argument from Articulability' debate. In summary, the aims of this paper are:

- To provide a clear exposition of Peacocke and McDowell's theories of perceptual content and concepts.
- To point out that their theories of concepts are radically different.
- To shed some light on why they both adopt a different stance with regard to the argument from articulability by arguing that their different positions are in part motivated by different theories of concepts.

Chapter one of this essay examines Peacocke's non-conceptualism. The second chapter attempts an explanation of McDowell's conceptualism and theory of concepts. Chapter three enters into a discussion of the first pair of opposing claims around the relation between experience and belief. The fourth chapter looks at the second pair of opposing claims around the argument from articulability. This essay concludes with the proposal that the argument from articulability rests on an equivocation.