

# COPING WITH NONCONCEPTUALISM? ON MERLEAU-PONTY AND MCDOWELL

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Does Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology matter to recent debates concerning nonconceptual content? Prima facie the answer might be no; the debate has been largely a matter for analytic philosophers, often following the basic terms set out in Gareth Evans's *The Varieties of Reference* and John McDowell's ensuing critique of Evans in *Mind and World*.<sup>1</sup> But despite its analytic roots, for some this debate provides fertile ground for combining Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. In particular, several scholars, including Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, have argued that existential phenomenology, of the type found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, supports Evans's idea that there is a nonconceptual component to human experience. Merleau-Ponty is thus also used to argue against McDowell.

It is not clear, however, that Merleau-Ponty's work has been presented correctly in the debate. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is pertinent to contemporary concerns, but it is (qualifiedly) wrong to put Merleau-Ponty with the supporters of nonconceptual content. Or so this essay will contend. While Merleau-Ponty would most likely disagree with McDowell on many issues, such points of disagreement are not really conveyed by the recent literature, and that literature also misses certain aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work that display an affinity with McDowell's aims. Ultimately, using Merleau-Ponty to make arguments in favor of nonconceptual content runs counter to the general aims of his phenomenology.

To frame the argument, I will briefly present an overview of the nonconceptualist position, with an eye to providing context for evaluating Merleau-Ponty's potential contribution. Then I will examine the most prominent arguments for interpreting *Phenomenology of Perception* as contributing to the nonconceptualist side. Following this it will be shown that those arguments misconstrue the differences between

Merleau-Ponty and McDowell by understating and overstating, respectively, the rationalism present in their views, and by missing the role that intersubjectivity, language, and culture play in the works of both.

## Evans and the Basis of Nonconceptualism

One initial way to link Merleau-Ponty to the debate over nonconceptual content (which is noted in the introduction to the recent *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*) is to draw a line from Merleau-Ponty to Gareth Evans through Charles Taylor.<sup>2</sup> Evans played a crucial role in introducing the notion of nonconceptual perceptual content back into contemporary philosophy. And in the middle of his most influential discussion of nonconceptual content, he draws crucial insights on perception from Taylor's essay "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments."<sup>3</sup> Taylor, in turn, takes Merleau-Ponty's conception of "embodied agency" to be central to his arguments.<sup>4</sup> So it seems that Merleau-Ponty played an indirect role in bringing about the current debate over nonconceptual content.

In the portion of *The Varieties of Reference* that contains the Taylor/Merleau-Ponty connection, Evans argues that there is an "information-link between subject and object, which provides the subject with (nonconceptual) information about the states and doings of the [perceived] object."<sup>5</sup> This information is not necessarily part of conscious experience, nor is it necessarily thought about. It may become "the input to a thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system," but it is important to note that such a conceptual system stands separately from the information system which provides the inputs.<sup>6</sup> As Evans put it:

I am not requiring that the content of conscious experience itself be conceptual content. All I am requiring for conscious experience is that the subject exercise some concepts—have some

thoughts—and that the content of those thoughts should depend systematically upon the informational properties of the input.<sup>7</sup>

So perception presents us with information that provides a kind of raw material to be conceptualized through our thinking and reasoning activities.

Such thinking and reasoning activities involve applying concepts, which Evans thinks must fit the so-called “Generality Constraint.” According to this view, conceptual thoughts are structured and thus decomposable and recomposable. So, for instance, having the thought “John is happy” means that we have the concepts “John” and “happy” and can use them to form other thoughts of the type “John is x” and “Y is happy” (wherein “x” is a concept that could be possibly predicated of John, like “sad,” and “Y” is a concept that could possibly be the subject of the predicate “happy,” like “Harry”).<sup>8</sup> Conceptual thought thus requires such structured elements, and this compositional structure and generality is not to be found in nonconceptual experience.

While Evans’s discussion of nonconceptual content is incomplete, several of his suggestions have become crucial for subsequent, more developed arguments.<sup>9</sup> Three of those suggestions are most important for the references to Merleau-Ponty: the “richness argument,” the “noncognitive disposition argument,” and the “animal/human continuity argument.”<sup>10</sup>

The richness argument holds that there is too much to the content of our perceptions for us to be able to parse it out conceptually. The root of the argument is Evans’s assertion that “no account of what it is to be in a nonconceptual informational state can be given in terms of dispositions to exercise concepts unless those concepts are assumed to be endlessly fine-grained.”<sup>11</sup> But this would seem to overly strain our perceptual abilities. As Richard Heck helpfully puts the point:

Consider your current perceptual state—and now imagine what a complete description of the way the world appears to you at this moment might be like. Surely a thousand words would hardly begin to do the job. And it is not just that the description would be long; rather, it seems hard to imagine . . . that you now possess all the

concepts that would be expressed by the words occurring in such a description, even if one could be framed.<sup>12</sup>

We presumably do not have a generalizable, compositional concept for every fine-grained aspect of experience, and we thus cannot involve such contents in active thinking.

The precognitive disposition argument picks up on another aspect of perception. There are seemingly elements to our experience that guide or initiate action without our actively thinking about them. As Evans notes, “we do not have to *think* or *calculate* which way to turn our heads (say) in order to look for the source of [a] sound.” Thus, perception “consists at least partly in being disposed to do various things.”<sup>13</sup> And as Sean Kelly points out, Evans does not mean that there could be calculation happening non-consciously; rather, the perceiver is disposed to act when such perceptual content is encountered without any cognitive acts taking place.<sup>14</sup> This content may well be quite meaningful to us insofar as it motivates or solicits important actions, yet is not conceptual, insofar as it is not actively thought.

Evans also takes exception to philosophical theories that understand perception in terms of belief, because belief involves a sophisticated mental ability, while perception seems to be more primitive. Along these lines he notes that perception is something that, “after all, we share with animals . . . [we cannot] properly understand the mechanism whereby we gain information from others unless we realize that it is already operative at a stage of human intellectual development that pre-dates the applicability of the more sophisticated notion.”<sup>15</sup> If we assume that all human experience is marked by belief (as a conceptualist presumably would), we would then seem to deny that humans share aspects of their mentality with nonhuman animals (and human infants) that are not capable of such sophisticated cognitive states. Since we are continuous with nonhuman animals in that we share perception with them, it must be the case that the information system is not marked by concepts. So goes the animal/human continuity argument.<sup>16</sup>

These arguments do not necessarily canvas all Evans’s ideas. They represent, however, the primary areas where Merleau-Ponty’s work

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has been inserted into the debates over nonconceptual content. Thus they should help guide the next section, which will look at the recent scholarship on Merleau-Ponty's supposed nonconceptualism.

### Merleau-Pontyian Versions of Evans's Arguments

Various ideas developed in *Phenomenology of Perception* might be used to support the view that there is nonconceptual content in perceptual experience, and thus support Evans's views. We can get a good sense of this by examining Merleau-Ponty's perceptual holism, and the notions of context-dependence and indeterminacy that go with it.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the Gestalt figure-background framework "is the very definition of the phenomenon of perception," because the "perceptual 'something' is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a 'field.'"<sup>17</sup> This is not some kind of homogenous condition of possibility for any perceptual experience. Even if any perception in general must take on such a structure, the crucial point is that there must be a *particular* background present for a *particular* figure to emerge. Perception can only happen within a specific holistic context.

For Sean Kelly, this kind of context dependence shows that there is nonconceptual content.<sup>18</sup> And he takes Merleau-Ponty to present a strong argument in this regard. Consider Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perceiving a blue carpet that "would never be the same blue were it not a woolly blue."<sup>19</sup> The idea here is that perceived properties are dependent upon the objects of which they are perceived to be properties. To use an example suggested by Kelly, the blue of a shiny steel ball would be a different blue from the blue of the woolly carpet, even if they might in some sense be the same shade. Concepts could not grasp such qualities because they would have to be fine grained enough to specify every possible context. But then they wouldn't be concepts at all, because they would be so specific as to not be generalizable. So if Merleau-Ponty is correct about the holistic nature of perception, this would seem to imply that perceptual experiences are so context-sensitive that they must contain nonconceptual content. Thus Kelly

supports a specific version of Evans's richness argument, and finds that argument in Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty's holism raises another issue that can be used to argue for nonconceptualism. Often, defenders of holism attend to how their theories enable one to discern *determinate* content out of the holistic network. Counter to this aim, though, Merleau-Ponty asserts that "we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon." This discussion of indeterminacy is a part of a criticism of the idea that the "meaning" of objects in our visual field are "fully developed and determinate." If this were the case, the totality of objects perceived at any point would have to be determinate, and thus we ought to see a delimited area with clear borders. But our visual fields are not like that, rather "there occurs here an indeterminate vision, a vision of something or other, and, to take the extreme case, what is behind my back is not without some element of visual presence." Objects and qualities, as we experience them, are not actually distinct things which attract our attention singularly. They arise, Merleau-Ponty points out, in an atmosphere of indeterminacy and take on "an equivocal meaning" which has "an expressive value rather than logical signification."<sup>20</sup>

Lilian Alweiss has argued that this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought damages McDowell's conceptualist view. Because McDowell wants all experience to be conceptually ordered, Alweiss argues that he must hold that all experience is completely divided up into units of determinate content by that conceptual ordering. She thus claims that for McDowell, "what is given in experience are facts which are transparent. . . . Merleau-Ponty, in turn, questions whether perceptual experience is necessarily transparent."<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on indeterminacy keeps him from thinking that perceptual experience is transparent. Because of its holistic character, experience is full of "grey areas," so to speak, and thus cannot be made up entirely of objective, determinable, transparent content.

Thus, on Alweiss's view, if Merleau-Ponty is right about the indeterminate, ambiguous, holistic nature of experience, experience must contain nonconceptual content. This argument trades on the same basic point as the richness argument: If we attend to what our everyday

experience is really like, we will see that a good part of it slips away from generalized concepts. In this case, the problem is not that our concepts are not fine-grained enough to grasp our experience, but that our experience is not, so to speak, divided into "grains" at all, whether fine or course.

In making her argument, Alweiss notes that "Merleau-Ponty argues that we have a 'pre-theoretical' or indeterminate understanding of the world."<sup>22</sup> "Pre-theoretical" here means not thought through or cognized; the idea is that our experience is rooted in a precognitive background. Alweiss's statement suggests that "pre-theoretical" and "indeterminate" are the same, but this is clearly false; one could, in principle, experience objects that are fully determinate but not have yet grasped that in thought (and thus the experience is "pre-theoretical"). Nonetheless, it is reasonable to link Merleau-Ponty's notion that our experience is rooted in a noncognitive background to his holism more generally, insofar as both points lead to the contention that our experience is not divided up into discrete thinkable contents.

One of Merleau-Ponty's primary aims in *Phenomenology of Perception* is to show how "consciousness must be faced with its own unreflective life in things."<sup>23</sup> The general point of such a claim is that our experience is not made up entirely of explicit mental acts. We take for granted an unreflective lived context that provides a background for our activities. In a critical discussion of McDowell's *Mind and World*, Charles Taylor argues that the notion of the precognitive background in Merleau-Ponty (and Heidegger) is close to the point that Evans is trying to make in describing the nonconceptual information system. There must be a pre-conceptual background out of which our actively rational activities emerge, and McDowell cannot account for this.<sup>24</sup>

In the process of linking Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Evans, Taylor also connects all three, unsurprisingly, to Hubert Dreyfus's discussions of "coping." In much of his work (including his recent discussions of Merleau-Ponty), Dreyfus has been most interested in describing the ways in which human beings, as embodied subjects, get along practically in the world. This everyday getting along in the world is what he calls "coping," and he argues

that everyday coping is generally noncognitive.

Descriptions of skill acquisition and skillful activity are used to make this point. Dreyfus first argues that the learner moves from rule-following, which has a cognitive basis, to having a noncognitive openness to the world. To progress, the student must learn to respond in appropriate ways to lived situations that are far too complex to be cognitively represented. This movement reaches its peak with the expert, who "thanks to a vast repertoire of situational discriminations . . . sees how to achieve his goal," and this "allows the immediate intuitive situational response that is characteristic of expertise."<sup>25</sup> Those at lower levels still need to occasionally make conscious decisions, but the expert has moved completely away from cognition to an intuitive openness to the world.

Furthermore, most everyday activity is in some sense what Dreyfus calls expert activity. This might seem like an odd claim when one thinks of being an expert at difficult tasks. The notion that standard activity is expert activity might make more sense, however, if we consider that the average person is "expert" at everyday activities like walking, drinking out of a glass, and sitting down in a chair. The majority of the things we do each day require little cognition. Merleau-Ponty links such everyday "background" coping abilities to something he calls the "intentional arc," and this is a concept that figures prominently in Dreyfus's work. Dreyfus describes it in terms of a "feedback loop"; as people deal with more practical situations, they "acquire more and more selective responses."<sup>26</sup> He commonly cites the following passage by Merleau-Ponty on the intentional arc:<sup>27</sup>

The life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an "intentional arc" which projects round about us our past, our future, [and] our human setting.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between embodied actor and world forms a kind of circuit that becomes enriched as it develops, and this becomes the basis for most of our daily action. This is the sense in which life is "subtended" by the intentional arc; it provides the basis upon which specialized forms of action can take place. For Dreyfus, this conception of the intentional arc

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leads to a kind of foundationalism; there is a fundamental level of embodied coping which is "self-sufficient, constant, and pervasive," and thus separable from our higher-level "mindedness."<sup>29</sup> Though Taylor denies foundationalism, he asserts that "coping is prior and pervasive," thus echoing the sentiment that there is a constant element of our experience that supports, and is at least in principle separable from, our conceptual cognitive activities. Thus Dreyfus and Taylor provide, using Merleau-Ponty, a more fully developed version of Evans's noncognitive disposition argument.

Taylor further asserts that thinking about coping in the proper (nonconceptual) way helps us understand our connections with non-human animals in ways that McDowell's view cannot, and thus he takes up the animal/human continuity argument.<sup>30</sup> More directly Dreyfus states that if we side with McDowell, we must deny the "more basic perceptual capacities we seem to share with prelinguistic infants and higher animals"<sup>31</sup> Neither Taylor nor Dreyfus cites Merleau-Ponty on the link between humans and animals, but both take him to support the animal/human continuity argument at least indirectly, insofar as they take it to be supported by their theory of coping, which they in turn take to be Merleau-Pontyan.

Given this initial exposition of the arguments, it seems as though the link between Merleau-Ponty and Evans is, philosophically at least, even stronger than the indirect link noted earlier. It also seems as though in giving specific versions of the types of arguments marshaled by Evans in favor of nonconceptual content, Merleau-Ponty presents strong opposition to McDowell. As it turns out, though, the nonconceptualist reading of Merleau-Ponty ignores certain crucial elements in his work that speak against such an interpretation.

### Some Problems with the Foregoing Arguments

One might wonder, at this point, why McDowell would disagree with the idea that we are presented in perception with certain "information" that is at first nonconceptual. His rejection of nonconceptual content is driven by the fact that it is wrong to hold "that judgments of experience are 'based upon' ex-

perience even though these relations are supposed to hold across a boundary that encloses spontaneity."<sup>32</sup> Perception plays a role in justifying our beliefs, and our empirical beliefs can clearly be right or wrong. But if perceptual contents are nonconceptual, they would seemingly enter thinking as "a brute impact from the exterior," which would only "offer exculpations when we wanted justifications."<sup>33</sup> If perceptions play a role in truly justifying our beliefs, they must be somehow graspable in a conceptual manner, because our act of justifying beliefs involves conceptual thought. Evans's notion of the "information system" obscures this fact.

From a certain perspective, it might seem fairly obvious that Merleau-Ponty would disagree with McDowell. After all, Merleau-Ponty focused a good deal of his energies on describing how our engagement with the world is based in our embodied actions. McDowell's emphasis on concepts, on the other hand, might seem to forsake the body in favor of the mind. This difference would perhaps become even more pronounced when one considers the link McDowell makes between conceptualism and rationalism. For experience to be conceptually articulated is for it to be connected to rationality, such that for McDowell "another way of putting my claim is to say that our perceptual experience is permeated with rationality."<sup>34</sup> *Prima facie*, Merleau-Ponty's persistent attacks on "intellectualism" in *Phenomenology of Perception* speak against such rationalism.<sup>35</sup>

But looked at from another perspective, Merleau-Ponty and McDowell have a fair bit in common. In an essay on *Mind and World* of which McDowell generally approves, Richard Bernstein situates McDowell's work in the Hegelian tradition of overcoming Kantian dualisms, and notes that for McDowell "the essential relation that we, as thinking and knowing beings, have to the world is one of openness to the world with no fixed boundaries."<sup>36</sup> In describing McDowell in this (fairly uncontroversial) way, Bernstein means to connect McDowell's work to the Continental tradition that follows Hegel, and that is a tradition into which Merleau-Ponty obviously falls. Merleau-Ponty is clearly interested in establishing our openness to the world, as seen when he rejects St. Augustine's remark regard-

