

Eva SCHMIDT, *Modest Nonconceptualism: Epistemology, Phenomenology, and Content*. Dordrecht: Springer. 2015. 268 pp. ISBN 978-3-319-18901-7

Most of those working in the philosophy of mind today would agree that thoughts are representational. My thought that dogs bark represents something like the state of affairs that dogs bark—and thus is accurate only if that state of affairs obtains and inaccurate otherwise. But there are many good reasons to think that perceptual experiences are representational too. My visual experience of the computer screen in front of me would seem to represent several of its features, such as its colors and shape. To use a piece of current philosophical jargon, perceptual experiences, like thoughts, have *content*. The content of a state is typically understood to be the way in which it represents the world; it specifies (or simply is) the conditions under which the state is accurate.

Perception and thought, however, would seem to represent things in different ways—so what is the difference between these modes of representation? A common response to this question in the contemporary philosophy of perception is that, while the contents of thoughts involve *concepts* or *conceptual content*, such as the concepts DOG and BARK, perceptual experiences instead have *nonconceptual content*. This distinction, however, has proven to be somewhat obscure.

In her new book, *Modest Nonconceptualism: Epistemology, Phenomenology, and Content*, Eva Schmidt sheds much light on the topic, developing and defending a view that she calls ‘modest nonconceptualism’. Schmidt’s nonconceptualism is modest in part because it holds only that perceptual experience has nonconceptual content; it may have conceptual content as well. She offers a range of arguments for her view, which she maintains is preferable to conceptualist alternatives.

After a brief introductory chapter, Schmidt does an admirable job in chapter 2 presenting and clarifying many of the key notions in the area, many of which have long remained rather unclear. For example, there is much debate regarding what concepts themselves are—they have been variously hypothesized to be abstract Fregean senses, representational mental items, the grounds of certain cognitive abilities, and so on. Schmidt adopts a pluralist approach to concepts, according to which they might be understood in any of these ways. And she proffers a reasonably neutral abilities account of concept possession, wherein concepts are characterized by their roles in enabling us to re-identifying things, draw inferences, and satisfy Gareth Evans’ (1982) generality constraint (the constraint that if one can be in a state with the content that *a is F*, then one can also be in a state with the content that *a is G*). Similarly, there is much debate about the metaphysics of content: are they Fregean propositions composed of senses or modes of presentation, Russellian propositions composed of objects and properties, Lewisian propositions composed of sets of possible worlds, or something else? Here Schmidt assumes, as most do within this literature, that conceptual content is Fregean.

In the course of developing her account, Schmidt discusses in chapter 3 a putative ambiguity in claims about nonconceptualism. Following Richard Heck (2000) and others, Schmidt maintains that there is a distinction between a state’s being nonconceptual and a content’s being nonconceptual. To say that a state is nonconceptual is to say that one need not possess the concepts that (canonically) characterize its content. To say that a content is nonconceptual is to say that it is not the kind of content that can be the content of cognitive states such as beliefs. And these varieties of nonconceptualism purportedly can come apart. Those who think that a state’s

having nonconceptual content and being nonconceptual go hand-in-hand endorse what Schmidt calls the ‘state-to-content principle’, or ‘S2C’. Schmidt’s modest nonconceptualism is committed to S2C.

According to Schmidt, perceptual experiences are nonconceptual states insofar as it is possible to be in such states without having to be able to exercise every one of the relevant abilities with respect to what they represent (e.g., we need not be able to re-identify what we can perceptually represent). She similarly maintains that perceptual experiences have nonconceptual content insofar as their contents are not (exhaustively) Fregean. Instead, she proposes that perceptual content is best understood as roughly what Christopher Peacocke (1992) has called ‘scenario content’: a kind of nonpropositional content that specifies how the space around the perceiver is filled in. Unlike the propositional conceptual contents of beliefs, which can be true or false, the content of perceptual experiences determines accuracy conditions and need not be truth-evaluable.

Schmidt does not so much argue for the claim that perceptual content is scenario content as assert that “scenario contents provide the best account for experiential content” (p. 15). So I would have liked a bit more discussion of other candidates. Indeed, one would have welcomed a more overt defense of the idea that perceptual experiences are representational in the first place. Some considerations in favor of representationalism are implied by Schmidt’s arguments that perceptual content is nonconceptual, but I would have preferred more explicit arguments for the view. After all, according to so-called naïve or direct realism, perceptual experience is not representational (or, sometimes more modestly, not primarily representational), but involves relations to perceived objects. Schmidt briefly acknowledges this view (on p. 8), but sets it aside. It would be interesting to explore the degree to which naïve realism can

accommodate many of Schmidt’s insights in favor of a nonconceptual representationalism.

Since modest nonconceptualism is committed to S2C, Schmidt evaluates in chapter 3 many prominent efforts to motivate the principle. For example, she considers and rejects several attempts to dismiss the state/content nonconceptualism distinction as simply incoherent. Likewise, she questions Heck’s (2007) argument that a view on which perceptual experiences are nonconceptual but have conceptual content is problematic, insofar as it would entail that perceptual experiences would meet the generality constraint. Schmidt replies that something like the generality constraint holds for perceptual experience too. My ability to see an orange cat, she argues, entails that I can see cats of other colors as well.

Whether or not Schmidt’s critiques of these other approaches to defending S2C are compelling, she does offer her own justification of it. Schmidt proposes a relevant methodological principle: that we should attribute to perceptual states only those contents which best suit our theoretical purposes. And she identifies roughly three motivating concerns about attributions of content to experience (pp. 61–62): our account of perceptual content must minimally explain how it is that the thoughts we form about the world on the basis of perception are about the mind-independent world, how those thoughts about the world are justified by perception, and how those contents explain or fit with how things seem from the first-person perspective—what Schmidt calls respectively the ‘content’, ‘epistemological’, and ‘phenomenological’ worries. Crucially, Schmidt argues that, if perceptual states are nonconceptual (insofar as they do not require the possession of relevant conceptual abilities), then these purposes justify only the attribution of nonconceptual scenario contents to them.

While I am sympathetic with Schmidt’s methodological principle, I am not sure everyone will be moved by her

arguments here. Regarding the phenomenological worry, for example, Schmidt argues that perception does not seem to involve modes of presentation, but rather “immediately confronts the perceiver with objects and their properties” (p. 69)—and that this feature of experience is best explained by the fact that scenario content does not involve modes of presentation. This argument would seem to assume that, if perceptual content were Fregean, what we would perceive are our modes of presentation. But even if conceptualism were true, we would seldom if ever be aware of modes of presentation. What we would perceive are objects and their properties, which we would perceive by *being in states* that involve Fregean modes of presentation. So it’s not clear that this phenomenological consideration cuts any ice.

The majority of the book (chapters 4–6) presents six kinds of arguments for modest nonconceptualism. To her credit, Schmidt does not endorse just any argument for nonconceptualism; she often offers potent critiques of many of the popular arguments for it. For example, Schmidt discusses the well-known *Argument from Fineness of Grain* for nonconceptualism. This argument is often introduced with Evans’ famous rhetorical question: “Do we really understand the proposal that we have as many colour concepts as there are shades that we can sensibly discriminate?” (1982, p. 229; cited on Schmidt, p. 74). It would seem, for example, that I can visually experience many more shades of red than I have individual words (and thus arguably concepts) that correspond to them—that experience is more finely grained than our conceptual repertoire. The standard conceptualist reply to this argument is that, while we do not possess lexical concepts for each color we can experience, we possess *demonstrative* concepts such as THAT SHADE for each. Schmidt replies that, while this strategy initially meets the challenge, it nonetheless fails because purely demonstrative perceptual contents do not address the phenomenological worry insofar

as such contents cannot explain the rich phenomenal character of experience, especially in cases of hallucination wherein there is no real-world property to demonstrate. Thus, she concludes, perceptual experience involves at least some nonconceptual content.

Similarly, Schmidt considers many other major arguments for nonconceptualism. For example, she discusses the *Argument from Animal and Infant Perception*—the argument that since nonhuman animals and human infants plausibly have perceptual experiences despite plausibly not possessing concepts, experience is nonconceptual—and the *Argument from Concept Possession*—the argument that since we plausibly acquire concepts on the basis of perceptual experience, experience cannot itself require concepts.

While Schmidt’s explorations in these sections are generally clear and careful, I’m again suspicious that they will not move everyone. Regarding her defense of the Argument from Fineness of Grain, for example, Schmidt fails to consider other potential conceptualist replies. Consider Pete Mandik’s (2012) version of conceptualism, which does not advert to demonstrative concepts at all. Mandik proposes that, while we may not possess lexical concepts for each color we can experience, we arguably do possess sufficiently many fine-grained *comparative concepts* such as A SHADE OF RED DARKER THAN THE SHADE TO THE RIGHT. And Mandik convincingly argues that a version of conceptualism that exploits a combination of basic lexical concepts such as RED and such nondemonstrative comparative concepts can explain a variety of perceptual phenomena, such as the fact that we can distinguish two very similar but distinct shades when the shades are presented simultaneously but not when they are presented one after the other. I would also think such a view can answer Schmidt’s phenomenological worry. However, regardless of their successes or failures, Schmidt’s

presentations of these arguments are illuminating.

In chapters 7 and 8, Schmidt replies to two central conceptualist objections to nonconceptualism. The first family of worries question whether nonconceptual perceptual experience could provide adequate justification for our beliefs about the world. Schmidt observes that these concerns have their origins at least in Wilfrid Sellars' (1956) famous discussion of the so-called *myth of the given* and she organizes them under the header of the 'epistemological objection' to nonconceptualism. The second family of worries—what she calls the 'objection from objectivity'—question whether nonconceptual perceptual experiences could account for the seemingly objective character of the mind-independent world.

In reply to the epistemological objection, for example, Schmidt proposes an account of perceptual justification, according to which nonconceptual perceptual experiences are capable of providing noninferential justification of the respective conceptual beliefs, despite having contents of different natures, because such states have in common what she calls 'externally individuated contents'—that is, they concern the same external things. And she defends this reasonable view from several objections.

There are of course many other details of this fine book that I could discuss, but at this point I cannot help but mention two potential features of Schmidt's account that she might have explored, which are of particular interest to me. First, it seems to me that any mature theory of content requires an account of the grounds of those contents: an explanation of why a state has the particular content that it does in the first place. Unfortunately, Schmidt does not offer such an account. Perhaps this is because she assumes that some kind of causal-covariational or informational theory of content-determination (of the sort that Fred Dretske (1995) or Michael Tye (1995) offer for their varieties of nonconceptual content)

might be true. But such views are questionable. I (2015) myself have recently argued that perceptual content is nonconceptual, but that perceptual contents are determined holistically in terms of perceptual states' relations to one another. And I've argued that such a theory of the grounds of perceptual content puts serious restrictions on the ways and kinds of things that perceptual experiences represent. While many of Schmidt's arguments support this kind of account, it is not clear that it is compatible with every facet of her scenario-content-based view.

Second, while this is a book primarily about perceptual content, Schmidt casts the view in terms of the contents of perceptual *experience*—and so I think that Schmidt would have done well to discuss more explicitly how *consciousness* fits in the picture. There is, after all, much evidence that perceptual states can occur without being conscious, as in experiments involving masked priming and pathological conditions such as blindsight. Thus it is unclear why Schmidt focuses on conscious perceptual experience, as opposed to perceptual states generally. Though many of Schmidt's arguments depend on phenomenological considerations, not all do; I wonder whether or not Schmidt's modest nonconceptualism might explain the contents of nonconscious perceptual states too.

*Modest Nonconceptualism* is carefully argued and a helpful tour of the debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists. While I am not convinced by all of Schmidt's arguments, I profited much from thinking about them. Anyone interested in perception, representation, concepts, perceptual justification, and related topics will benefit from reading this book.<sup>1</sup>

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