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In Defence of Non-conceptual Content

In recent times, Evans' idea that mental states could have non-conceptual contents has been attacked. McDowell (1994) and Brewer (1999) have both argued that that notion does not have any epistemological role because notions such as *justification* or *evidential support*, that might relate mental contents to each other, must be framed in conceptual terms. On his side, Brewer has argued that instead of non-conceptual content we should consider *demonstrative concepts* that have the same fine graininess of non-conceptual contents while having conceptual structure. In what follows I will argue that, first, that the notion of *demonstrative concept* is not viable and, second, that there is an epistemological role for non-conceptual content

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It is more than twenty years that the notion of non-conceptual content is matter of philosophical discussions. Originally proposed by Gareth Evans (1982), this notion has gained consensus and interest and it is now debated and criticized. In this paper, I will try to defend it against two vigorous attacks launched by John McDowell (1994) and Bill Brewer (1999). What is at stake is both the very existence and the epistemological role of states with non-conceptual content. McDowell and Brewer maintain a negative stance both toward the epistemological role and the ontological status of these states. In what follows, I will start by defending non-conceptual content from an ontological point of view, then I will provide an argument concerning the epistemological impact of these states in contrast with demonstrative states with conceptual content. Before getting started, however, some background information.

Evans thinks that we human beings are, among other things, gatherers, storers and transmitters of *information*. These three abilities are supported by a complex system, the informational system, composed of perceptual, mnemonic and communicative mechanisms. The informational states product of this system are considered to be primitive notions in philosophy. So, "*being in an informational state with such-and-such content*" (Evans 1982, p. 123) is an undefined notion. Evans gives us a couple of important features of these states. First of all they are belief-independent. This entails that an informational system does not need to form a belief for any state it gets in. Such a view parts company from the so-called epistemic theories of perception as the one exposed in Armstrong (1968), in which a perceptual state necessarily causes the fixation of a belief. There is a second feature that characterizes Evans' position. He thinks that an individual can entertain an informational state with a given content without possessing or mastering the concepts required to specify the content itself. This kind of states are of non-conceptual nature, and they present

themselves in perceptual cases. It should be immediately noticed that these states are representational all the way down, that is, they have correctness conditions, because the way in which the content represents the world might be correct or incorrect. Now, and this is Evans' more discussed tenet, it is possible also for us, linguistic creatures, to be in states with non-conceptual content because it is possible for us not to have the concepts required to characterize the state we may be in. For instance, "when we hear a sound as coming from a certain direction, we do not have to *think* or *calculate* which way to turn our heads (say) in order to look for the source of the sound" (Evans 1982, p. 155). Simply, the sound causes us to do various things as it gets in the machinery of the informational system, a system that, by itself, does not use concepts. So, we may have perceptual states with non-conceptual content. This is the thesis. The debate concerns the arguments in support of it and these can be divided into two areas: on the one side there are a number of arguments aimed at showing why it is necessary to postulate non-conceptual states and what exactly they are; on the other side there is a debate concerning the attribution condition of these states, and how apply them to individuals. The first set of arguments are quite often the core of the debate and their original source can be traced back to Evans himself; the second one can be found in authors as Cussins (1990) and Crane (1992) and has to do with the attribution activity through which we say that an individual may not have the concepts that are required to characterize the state it or s/he is in. Basically, this last debate defines non-conceptual states by saying that these are states that can be attributed to an individual even if the individual in question does not have the concepts necessary to master the content attributed. I will not get any deeper with respect to this last argument, concentrating myself on the first set.[1]

There are five arguments in favor of the notion of perceptual states with non-conceptual content, as Brewer, one of the opponents, organizes them. The last three concern belief independence, animals and infants' perceptual states and the alleged circularity of conceptual states, this last considered a serious challenge by Brewer himself. However, I will concentrate myself on the first two, in particular the second one, for I think that these are much more concerned with the very existence of perceptual states with non-conceptual content.

The first argument concerns the fine graininess of perceptual states as opposed to conceptual ones. Here, the original *locus* of the argument is Evans himself: "Do we really understand the proposal that we have as many color concepts as there are shades of color that we can sensibly discriminate?" (Evans 1982, p. 229). The idea is that our sensitivity transcends our conceptualizing abilities, being the former more fine-grained than the latter. If so, given that is possible to form a

[1] All the most important papers relevant for this debate have been re-published in Gunther (2003) with new interesting additions. A very useful survey of the whole debate is Toribio (2007).

judgment as: “This is darker than that” lacking the relevant color concepts, the judgment must be based on perceptual states with non-conceptual content.

McDowell and Brewer reply to this point basically in the same way. They argue that it is possible to make use of *demonstrative* concepts, such as “that shade of red”, that would have the same cardinality of their non-conceptual counterparts, being caused by the stimuli themselves. So the idea is that to each different shade of color it corresponds a different demonstrative concept in a one-to-one correspondence. These concepts would be context-dependent even if, in order to avoid objections concerning their intersubjectivity - a property that concepts are supposed to have at least since Frege’s analysis - Brewer admits that the subject may entertain them for a few moments. The idea of demonstrative concepts postulated against the first non-conceptualists argument, would have to solve the second non-conceptualist challenge, the one concerning non-transitivity.

The non-conceptualists’ argument goes as follows: suppose that color A be indiscriminable from color B and this one be indiscriminable from color C but that color A is discriminable from color C. If color perception were conceptual, along the line suggested in the argument introducing demonstrative concepts, it would follow that two colors fall in the same demonstrative concept if and only if they are perceptually indiscriminable. So, B falls in the same concept that A, C in the same that B and, by transitivity among concepts, C falls in the same concept that A. However, since C is discriminable from A it does not have to fall in the same concept. Contradiction. Hence, color perception cannot be framed in conceptual terms.

Brewer’s reply to this argument is, on my view, quite relevant to the entire debate. He agrees that color perception cannot be conceptual in this sense, but he thinks there is another and perfectly viable alternative. Brewer invites us in considering a color sample A and its corresponding color concept ‘that$_A$ shade’ which is grasped in confrontation with A even if, for reasons concerning intersubjectivity, it can be entertained for a few moments. So “something counts as having that$_A$ shade if and only if it is indiscriminable in color *from* A” a definition that, as Brewer points out, was already in McDowell (1994, p. 170 et passim). From this definition Brewer’s argument is as follows – let me quote him at length:

> The crucial point … is that it does not follow from any of this that a sample counts as having that$_A$ shade if it is indiscriminable in color from something, other than A, which counts as having that$_A$ shade (for the reason given)… Suppose, that is to say, that B counts as that$_A$ shade, because it is indiscriminable in color from A, and C is indiscriminable in color from B. Although it follows immediately that C counts as that$_B$ shade, and even though B has that$_A$ shade, it does not follow that C has that$_A$ shade. Thus, the purported contradiction disappears.

Contrary to what Brewer and McDowell think on this point, I believe that the contradiction is still there, and I will argue for this.

One the one side Brewer is taking into account the relation between colors and colors' concepts; on the other he is considering the notion of contiguity among colors, a notion that we find phenomenally plausible, because we may perceive almost all colors as forming a continuous series. So, it is important to belabor the notion of contiguity in some details.

What we should consider very carefully is the perceptual and conceptual status of contiguous colors and their conceptual counterpart. What is clear form Brewer's argument is that adjacent or contiguous shades are included in what we may call *contiguous colors demonstrative concepts*. We can define colors contiguity as follows:

C: Two colors samples are contiguous if and only if they may fall within the extension of both their conceptual counterparts.

By this I mean that there is a shade that can fall within the extension of *both* to $that_A$ shade and $that_B$ shade. That is, if A falls within the extension of $that_A$ shade and of $that_B$ shade *and* B falls within the extension of $that_B$ shade and of $that_A$ shade then A and B are contiguous colors. Conversely, we can also define demonstrative concepts contiguity as follows:

K: Two demonstrative color concepts are contiguous if and only if there is at least a color shade which falls within the extensions of both.

So, if both A shade and B shade fall within the extension of '$that_A$ shade' concept *and* within the extension of '$that_B$ shade' concept then '$that_A$ shade' and '$that_B$ shade' are contiguous colors demonstrative concepts.

Accordingly, being contiguous colors is a symmetrical relation: A is contiguous with B if and only if B is contiguous with A, with analogous consequences for color concepts. This means that:

C if and only if K

Now, how about B shade and its corresponding color concept '$that_B$ shade'? Because colors form a continuous series (the argument that follows does not apply just to the two extremes of the perceptual spectrum, i.e., red and violet, the one which are contiguous with infrared and ultraviolet, that are not perceivable) B is contiguous both with A *and* C. This entails that, according to Brewer's argument and my analysis of it, B falls within the extension of both '$that_A$ shade', '$that_B$ shade' *and* '$that_C$ shade' demonstrative concepts. However, the entire argument was supposed to show that it

was not possible to have transitivity from ‘that$_A$ shade’ to ‘that$_C$ shade’ given the perceptual discriminability of A and C. But B is a case in question, so the contradiction re-appears altogether. Let me show exactly what is going on here.

I think we have contradiction on both sides, that is, both in the direction that goes from colors to color concepts and in the opposite direction, the one that goes from color concepts to colors. From one side we have that one demonstrative color concept applies both to discriminable and indiscriminable color shades: ‘that$_B$ shade’ applies to colors A and B, the first symmetrical case, and to colors B and C, the second symmetrical case, with the elements of the first couple indiscriminable one from the other, as the elements of the second couple, but with one element of the first, namely A, discriminable from one element of the second, namely C. Hence, one and the same demonstrative concept, ‘that$_B$ shade’, applies to two color shades, A and C, that are discriminable one from the other.

On the other side we have that a color shade is at the same time discriminable and not discriminable from itself: in fact, because B has ‘that$_B$ shade’ as its conceptual counterpart, and because ‘that$_B$ shade’ has, as its color shades counterparts both A and C, since A is not discriminable from B and B is not discriminable from C but A is discriminable from C it follows that B is both discriminable and not discriminable from itself.

The contradiction appears also by considering the converse relation between colors and color concepts. In fact, B may be an example both of ‘that$_A$ shade’ and ‘that$_C$ shade’, giving the symmetrical relation. However, not being contiguous, ‘that$_A$ shade’ and ‘that$_C$ shade’ are color concepts supposed *not* to apply to one and the same color, as is the case with B, and so the argument collapses again (see Fig. 5). The argument by McDowell and Brewer, then, cannot show the conceptual nature of color perception.

However, this does not mean that non-conceptualists have it. In fact, a possible way out for conceptualists is to give up symmetry, together with transitivity, as a relation between contiguous color *concepts*. They would have to argue something like this: even if color shades form a continuous series, this does not entail that color concepts do. In particular, each discriminable shade falls within the extension of a specific color concept, and all the troubles engendered by overlapping concepts and contiguous shades are, as a matter of fact, problems of performance, not of competence. That is to say, our cognitive system is fine as it is in concepts-formation; troubles arise in concepts-retention and treatment, and for this we use endogenous helping devices, such as spectrum analysis, labeling – say ‘red 13’ attached to a color sample - and so forth.

This kind of reply has to face two difficulties. First of all, it is clear that the approach to concepts underlying this view is quite far from the one that is consistent with McDowell and

Brewer's general framework. The approach sketched, in fact, is similar to Fodor's theory of concepts, where these are considered as punctuate atomistic entities establishing one-to-one connections with their worldly referents, if any. On the contrary, both McDowell and Brewer seem to participate in a conceptual role view of concepts, according to which are the conceptual roles that individuate concepts. Accepting the atomistic view would entail accepting a sort of informational view in which the subject is completely passive with respect of external input, and his/her concepts are not part of a system of reasons but just the nomological result of causal connections. As McDowell would say, we would have exculpations where we want justifications. On the other side, empirical evidence concerning concepts' formation, retention and treatment does not match very well with a Fodorian style theory, while so far it seems to go hand in hand with molecularist and holistic views, as is the case with prototypical, definitional and mental model theories. However, even the adherence to Fodor's theory would not bring, by itself, to salvation. In fact, if we consider Fodor's background presuppositions, we can see that it is perfectly viable to have states with content beyond the linguistic domain, as he acknowledges the possibility of intentionality in infants and animals. So, what would be necessary for the conceptualists is a brand-new atomistic theory without the metaphysical assumptions endorsed by the Fodorian atomistic theory of concepts, which is the only one presently in town.

But there is another difficulty for the conceptualists. Usually, when a color concept has to be exemplified, we consider as cases in question concepts such as 'red' or 'white'. These are much less fine-grained than the demonstrative concept 'that$_X$ shade'. These concepts are those, so to say, responsible of the entire debate concerning non-conceptual content, and it is quite clear that not only the non-transitivity argument applies to them, but also the symmetry one does. Troubles arise when we consider what are the relations between these coarse grained concepts and the finer grained ones. Because it is quite plausible to say that both categories of concepts participate in the same "conceptual space" - to borrow an expression used by Sellars first and McDowell then - we have to consider what relations characterize these conceptual categories.

Let label a coarse grained concept of red 'C-red'. Analogously, consider C-purple as the color concept under which a contiguous shade may fall. Now, it is perfectly possible to have a finer grained concept of a color, say 'that$_{Red}$ shade', that, at time *t*, a subject is ready to consider as falling in the extension of C-red and, at a later time *t'*, the same subject is willing to take as falling within C-purple extension, so engendering the same kind of contradiction we saw in case of demonstrative color concepts.[2] Now, if we take a non-atomistic view of concept, the way in which we say what a

[2] This is not surprising, in a way, because the relation between coarse-grained and fine-grained concepts is asymmetrical. If something falls within the extension of a fine grained concept 'that$_{Red}$ shade' then it falls within the extension of one C-concept, for example C-red, but not the converse, given the coarse grainess of C-concepts. However, and here is the problem we just mentioned. So the very same shade that falls within the demonstrative concept 'that$_{Red}$

specific concept is a concept of is something like this. Speaking of 'Red' we may say that it is a surface property of opaque objects, a color, the color exemplified by a ripe tomato and by a bull's cape, and so forth. That is, we mention the inferential roles admitted for the concept in question, we show how to apply it and we mention items that exemplify it, allowing to recognize it. However, to consider further the example just given, a ripe tomato and a bull's cape may fall within the extension of quite different fine-grained concepts. Consequently, this would undermine one of the individuation conditions of the concept itself, the one that mentions examples. Since, as we saw, the other conditions of individuation of color concepts are not specific enough to individuate one and only one C-concept, the C-concept is not individuated at all. Moreover, the same demonstrative concept could have quite different relation with one and the same C-concept, undermining another possible individuation condition for C-concepts. It follows that demonstrative concepts not only do not solve the problem of coarse grained concepts, but make it worst because demonstrative concepts move the contradiction within the conceptual space itself, and not only in the extensional relations of coarse concepts.

Finally, there is a further difficulty, this one regarding the epistemological status of demonstrative concepts. I will try to elaborate an argument for it. The first step goes as follows. Every coarse color concept applies to one or another shade of color. Each shade of color falls, by definition, within the domain of at least *or* just one demonstrative concept (the disjunction is motivated by the symmetry argument). So, every coarse concept is backed by at least one or another demonstrative concept. Whenever we have a C-concept of red we have one or another 'that_X shade' concept. Now, it seems plausible to say that in each occasion in which perceptual states are involved, we cognitively process either C-concepts or demonstrative concepts. Suppose that C-concepts are processed. Perceptual C-concepts are quite similar to Locke's general concepts. For instance, there is a C-concept of 'triangle', to use Locke's example, which does not say if the triangle is isosceles, right-angled or scalene. When we perceive a triangle, though, we definitely perceive a specific kind of triangle. However, telling the kind of triangle does not exhaust the perceptual properties of the triangle itself. It does not say anything about the thickness of the lines or their colors. This lack of specificity is what re-opens the application of the transitivity argument. Now, two possibilities are open at this point. According to the first, since we would have the transitivity argument applied to this case, in order to avoid to re-introduce non-conceptual contents the conceptualists are forced to say that even in this case we have demonstrative concepts, leaving C-concepts without any cognitive role, at least for that matters perceptual states. That is, they should say that, as to perceptual states, there are not C-concepts but just demonstrative concepts.

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shade' could fall within the extension of another C-concept, for instance C-purple.

According to the second, they can assume that there is still room for C-concepts, because the graininess of the concepts depends on the subject's interests and epistemic ends. For instance, if it is enough to know whether there is an isosceles triangle as opposed to a scalene one, the subject may be content with that, and no demonstrative concept would be necessary. This option entails that we cannot say *a priori* whether the subject has a C-concept or a demonstrative one, because it is not possible to say what will be the interests and epistemic ends of the subject on each occasion. So, either there are not perceptual C-concepts or we cannot say *a priori* whether in a specific occasion the subject will have demonstrative concepts or C-concepts. But, if we have C-concepts then the transitivity argument applies, giving a point in favour of non-conceptualists. Let us move to the second step.

Consider now the epistemological role of demonstrative concepts. Brewer, and to a certain extent McDowell, argues that in order for a representational state to have an epistemological role, the subject must recognize that it forms a belief which is a reason for something. That is, s/he has to recognize that a given representational state has a form that enables it to serve "as a premise or a conclusion in inferences" (Brewer 1999, p. 150 *et passim*) and that as such it might constitute a reason *for* the subject's empirical beliefs (cf. Brewer 2005). Now, the questions are: what is the inferential status of a representational state characterized by demonstrative concepts and can a subject recognize the inferential role of such a state?

Take an inference like this: there are three patches of color, A, B and C, which are contiguous shades. The subject can observe just two patches at the same time. He judges that A is darker than B when confronted with A and B. Then he judges that B is darker than C, when confronted with B and C, and concludes that A has to be darker than C, even if A is not under observation. The subject, however, would not be able, at a later time, to recognize whether he is confronted with either A, B or C, given the similarity of these three shades. That is, the subject is not able to reliably associate the experience of perceiving a given patch of color with the label he or we put on that experience - namely our saying that he is perceiving A or red 13 - when confronted with $that_{Red}$ shade. So, the elements of his inference are not perception-independent, the opposite of what happens in case of any inference concerning abstract or C-concepts. The kind of inference we have when we use demonstrative concepts is, thus, a *demonstrative inference*, an inference that can be drawn only when the subject is directly experiencing *at least some* of the elements that constitute the inference itself.[3] Is this limitation consistent with Brewer requirement that a representational state can be considered an experience if this state has a form that enables the subject to recognize its inferential role? I think it is not. For, imagine now that the subject is introduced to a new patch of color, Z, and

[3] This is the subject of Peacocke (2001) where he somewhat concedes that a non-conceptual content could provide a reason *for* a subject's empirical beliefs provided that the subject can recognize such a role at the conceptual level.

to this one only. Is Z darker than either A, B or C? How does it fit in the shading scale of the three shades previously saw? The subject has no certain way to reply. He would have to test it directly. If so we should ask to ourselves: what is exactly the difference with the non-conceptualists? If, for that matter our rational and epistemological activities, demonstrative concepts do not give us any leverage with respect to direct perception, there seems to be no independent reason to postulate such concepts. Moreover, Sean Kelly (2001a) has argued that our perceptual discriminatory abilities exceed our ability to re-identify patches of color, because we may take a newly presented patch of color for one we already saw. So, since we have an independent argument for the conclusion that these concepts do not solve the problem of graininess between perception and conception, there seems to be no reason whatsoever to postulate them or, if you like, it seems that the reason to postulate them is entirely *ad hoc*.[4]

We have now the possibility to conclude our argument by judging the epistemological status of perceptual states. We saw that either there are not C-concepts or there is no *a priori* way to say whether the subject will have C-concepts or demonstrative concepts in any given occasion. However, if there are C-concepts then the transitivity argument applies. Then we saw that demonstrative concepts do not give any leverage with respect to non-conceptual states for that matter inference. So, both demonstrative concepts and non-conceptual contents are any useful for inferences unless we are considering direct evidence. Then, only C-concepts can play an inferential role, with demonstrative and non-conceptual perceptual states that get into the inferential machinery when direct evidence is at stake. The upshot of all this is that demonstrative concepts do not help conceptualists in defending the idea that only beliefs or other conceptual states are necessary for the purposes of justification unless they want to say that it is no possible for direct evidence to enter in the process of justification. On the contrary, if they want direct evidence to get into epistemological process, then since non-conceptual contents do not engender any contradiction, they have to prefer these states to demonstrative concepts.

McDowell used to argue that non-conceptual states are the new form assumed by the myth of the Given, a myth Sellars deeply criticized. However, the attempt to treat exclusively in conceptual terms all the mental state that gets in the process of justification seems the symptom of another myth, the intellectual myth (cf. Noë 2005). If the previous arguments are correct, I think we should better look with suspect to this myth as well.

Acknowledgements

[4] Kelly (2001b) has also argued that fine graininess is not that relevant for settling the issue. I leave this problem aside.

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