CONCEPTUALISM AND CONCEPT ACQUISITION

Abstract: Many think that the perceptual theory known as "conceptualism" cannot honor a common and intuitive constraint on concept acquisition—that we gain the initial power to deploy primitive concepts through experience. Their argument is: if experience involves the deployment of concepts, then one must possess the power to deploy those concepts *prior* to experience. I argue that the plausibility of this argument rests on a subtle equivocation. It's true that conceptualism requires a particular *kind* of power to deploy concepts prior to experience, but not the sort referenced in the intuitive constraint mentioned above. I end by proposing how the conceptualist might satisfy this constraint. I conclude that conceptualism is better situated to account for primitive concept acquisition than typically thought.

§1 Introduction

Some philosophers maintain that a perceptual theory known as "conceptualism" is incompatible with the acquisition of primitive concepts in experience. Of course, some nativists argue that *no* perceptual theory allows for the acquisition of primitive concepts (e.g. Fodor 1975), but let us assume that these nativist challenges can be answered. Features specific to conceptualism are thought to pose additional obstacles to primitive concept acquisition independent of general nativist concerns. I will not discuss all of the specific challenges surrounding concept acquisition that conceptualism has been thought to face (there are many). I intend to articulate and undermine one of these charges. As a first pass, the accusation is that, given conceptualism, one must possess a primitive concept prior to having an experience involving that concept, and so the acquisition of that concept must occur prior to experience if at all. My goal is not, therefore, to show that conceptualism has no difficulties accounting for primitive concept acquisition or to give a full account of how this occurs. My goal is to set aside a particular objection to conceptualism with the understanding that more work must be done to fully reconcile conceptualism and concept acquisition.

To adequately explain the ostensible problem at the center of this paper, I need to introduce some key concepts. I do this in §2. This positions me to present the anti-

conceptualist argument in §3 and undermine it in §4. Afterwards, in §5, I propose a conceptualist account that bypasses the original concern. I conclude that conceptualism is better positioned to explain primitive concept acquisition than previously thought.

§2 Key Concepts

I begin by saying a little about what concepts are. Nothing will hinge on this particular gloss. It is just helpful to have some shared idea of what concepts are before we talk about acquiring them. As is common in these debates, I will use "concepts" in what Bryne calls the "Fregean sense (pun intended)" (Byrne 2005, 231). On this view, concepts are understood to be constituents of Fregean Thoughts (or just "Thoughts"), which are the Fregean senses of well-formed sentences.[1] In propositional attitudes like belief, the subject grasps some propositional content *p* by standing in a certain relation (that we might call "entertaining") to a Thought that semantically expresses *p*. Concepts are the components constituting or composing these Fregean Thoughts. Concepts relate to Thoughts in roughly the same way that words relate to natural language sentences. You entertain a particular Thought by using, or "deploying," the concepts involved in it. Let's use the term "thought" to refer to the broad category of mental states with propositional content grasped via Fregean Thoughts. In other words, "thoughts" are those mental states whose occurrence consists at least partially in the deployment of concepts.

Concept acquisition, the central focus of this paper, is the process of coming into possession of a concept. This is often a multi-step process. There may be an initial stage in which the subject has only partial possession of a concept. She is able to deploy the concept in thought, but her understanding of that concept may be flawed or incomplete in important ways. This first stage is followed by a process in which the subject's grasp of the concept is strengthened and refined, culminating in a command of that concept

[1] You can think of Thoughts as specific kinds of guises (Salmon 1986) or ways of believing (Braun 2002) or modes of presentation.

that qualifies as full possession. A fully fleshed-out story of concept acquisition will not only detail the transition from partial to full possession, but also how the subject gains gains initial possession of the concept in the first place. In other words, how is the subject able to deploy that concept *at all?* For instance, a child might slowly master the concept CUP by testing hypotheses involving this concept.[2] Such testing might explain how the child learns which circumstances make it appropriate to affirm thoughts about cups, as well what other thoughts can be reasonably inferred in those circumstances. What this testing doesn't explain is how the child was able to form hypotheses involving the concept CUP in the first place. We might explain our ability to deploy complex concepts by appealing to their construction out of primitive concepts, but what of these primitive concepts? A complete account of concept acquisition must explain how we gain the initial ability to deploy such concepts, if only in a confused and imperfect way. This is first step in the acquisition process, and it is on this step that the paper will focus.[3]

It seems that we gain this initial ability to deploy primitive concepts in and through experience—a principle that I will call "the essentiality of experience". I will assume that any adequate account of primitive concept acquisition must honor the essentiality of experience. This is fair since my purpose is only to show that conceptualism is compatible with it, despite claims to the contrary. Nevertheless, a quick look at one of its key motivations will help us better understand what it means.

Consider Hume's observation that, "A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds. ... The case is the same, if the object, proper for exciting any sensation, has never been applied to the organ" (Hume 1999, 98). Mary the scientist (of

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[2] This model of learning is controversial. I am merely using it as a convenient illustration, not endorsing it.

[3] Speaks 2005 questions whether there is anything more to concept possession beyond this initial ability to deploy concepts in thought. Speaks calls this simpler view the thought-based view of concept possession (377). On this view, the paper may well focus on the complete acquisition process. I will continue to speak, however, like the acquisition process extends beyond gaining the mere ability to use the concept in thought.

Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment) serves as a contemporary illustration.[4] Mary cannot deploy the phenomenal concept of red, even in a confused manner, until experiencing something red. These examples seem to be instances of a general principle: that we cannot form thoughts involving a primitive concept unless we have encountered the right sorts of things in experience. This fact suggests that experience is what bestows on us the initial ability to deploy primitive concepts.

We are now in a position to reintroduce the main thesis of the paper. A number of philosophers accuse conceptualism of violating the essentiality of experience. In other words, they argue that on conceptualism, it isn't possible to gain the initial ability to deploy primitive concepts in experience. We'll see precisely why they think this in the next section (§3) and why I think they're mistaken in the section after that (§4). Building off my critique, I provide a way for conceptualists to honor the essentiality of experience in §5.

§3 A Problem for Conceptualism

Conceptualism about perceptual experience faces a *prima facie* difficulty in honoring the essentiality of experience. To understand this difficulty, we must first understand conceptualism. In the framework introduced above, conceptualism says that perceptions are a species of thought (or partially composed by a thought).[5] That is, when S perceives that *p*, S is entertaining a Fregean Thought that expresses *p*. Perceptions are a special kind of thought to be sure, perhaps with a very distinctive kind of phenomenology. Nevertheless, conceptualism holds that perceptions, like beliefs, involve entertaining a Thought, and entertaining a Thought requires deploying the concepts constituting that Thought. So, perceptions are conceptual mental states—states involving the deployment of concepts. It is from this feature of the view that conceptualism derives its name.

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[4] Jackson 1982.

[5] Some classic defenses of conceptualism include Brewer 1999, McDowell 1994, and Peacocke 1983.

The problem is that if perceptual experience *involves* deploying concepts, then it seemingly cannot explain how we first gained the power to deploy those concepts. We must have already had it prior to the experience. As John Campbell puts it,

> Experience of objects [as conceptualists would have it] simply presupposes, and so cannot explain, our ability to think about objects. (Campbell 2002, 123)

Campbell continues,

> Experience of objects has to be what explains our ability to think about objects. That means that we cannot view experience of objects as a way of grasping thoughts about objects. Experience of objects has to be something more primitive than the ability to think about objects, in terms of which the ability to think about objects can be explained. (Campbell 2002, 135)

Richard Heck expresses a similar worry when he writes,

> Suppose we say, with McDowell, that my having certain demonstrative concepts is partially constitutive of the world's appearing to me in a particular way. How then can my having that concept be explained by my having such an experience? There would not seem to be sufficient distance between my having the experience and my possessing the concept for the former to *explain* the latter. (Heck 2000, 492)

Finally, Adina Roskies argues that learning primitive perceptual concepts like RED on the basis of "visual experiences with content representing a red object (R-experiences)," is impossible given conceptualism. This is because:

> If having R experiences involves the concept RED, then the subject already possesses the concept RED, and so there is no tenable explanation available as to how that experience is responsible for the acquisition of such a concept. (Roskies 2008, 237-238)

Such comments from Campbell, Heck, and Roskies all come in the midst of broader criticisms of conceptualism which will not be the focus here. I am concerned with the following line of reasoning hinted at within all of these statements: namely, that deploying concepts in experience requires a prior ability to deploy those concepts (and maybe even prior *possession*), and experience obviously cannot grant a precondition of its own existence. That is, if experience consists in deploying concepts, then it can't explain

how we are able to deploy those concepts in the first place. So, on the conceptualist picture, the first stage of concept acquisition either begins *prior* to experience or not at all. Either way the essentiality of experience is violated.

Many others have voiced, or at least hinted at, similar objections.[6] We can formalize the common thread in these arguments as follows:

THE PRIOR POWER ARGUMENT

Premise 1	If both conceptualism and the essentiality of experience are true, then subject S gains the power to deploy primitive concept C through an experience involving the deployment of C.
Premise 2	If S has an experience involving C, then S has the power to deploy C prior to that experience.
Premise 3	If S has the power to deploy C prior to an experience involving C, then S cannot gain the power to deploy C through that experience.
Conclusion 1	Thus, S cannot gain the power to deploy C through an experience involving the deployment of C.
Conclusion 2	Therefore, it's not the case that conceptualism and the essentiality of experience are true.

In the following section, I show why the prior power argument fails, despite its initial plausibility. I then give a straightforward conceptualist explanation of how experience empowers us to deploy primitive concepts. I will be taking conceptualism as given since I only intend to show that *if* conceptualism is true, there is no difficulty in honoring the essentiality of experience.

§4 Solving the Problem

Powers come in many kinds. A subject may have the power to deploy a concept in one sense but not another. The prior power argument, as stated, doesn't specify precisely which kind of power is at issue. This is the crack into which I'll drive my wedge. Depending on which kind of power is selected, one or another premise of the

[6] E.g. Brewer 2011, Cassam 2011, and Peacocke 2001. Bengson, Grube, and Korman 2011 mention the argument but stop short of endorsing it.

argument becomes implausible. The intuitiveness of the prior power argument thus relies on a subtle equivocation on the "power to deploy C".

To begin, let's examine a kind of power that I will call a "capacity". One has the capacity to perform a task merely by being the kind of thing that, after suitable stimulation and development, can complete that task. In the most straightforward case, this will involve actually possessing an apparatus that would perform that task were it undergo the necessary developments and were enabling conditions to obtain.[7] Having the capacity to perform an activity does not mean that you can perform the activity immediately or voluntarily, nor does it mean that you presently know how to perform it. For instance, most adult humans have the capacity to solve a Rubik's cube—they have the mental machinery sufficient to carry out such a task (unlike bulldogs, fleas, and rocks)—but few could do so at present. Similarly, I have the physical capacity to finish an Iron Man competition, but I'd have to train my body for several weeks (at least) before I could actually complete the race.

The notion of a capacity is necessary for distinguishing between those things that have the latent but undeveloped power to perform an activity and those that have no power to perform that activity whatsoever. Returning to the Rubik's cube example, there is clearly some sense in which the Average Jane is mentally capable of solving a Rubik's cube in which a largemouth bass is not, even if the Average Jane presently finds herself stumped. The kind of power that I am calling a "capacity" marks the salient difference between the Average Jane and the largemouth bass.

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[7] I am also open to extending the capacity to perform an activity to beings that do not *actually* possess such an apparatus, but to whom such an apparatus belongs by nature. For instance, a human being who is still in fetal development or who has lost their eyes would in this sense still have the capacity to see, given that they are the kind of thing to which eyes (the apparatus that, in the right conditions and having undergone suitable development, results in sight) are natural. If this is too metaphysically-laden for the reader, then one is welcome to construe capacities solely in terms of *actually* possessing the requisite apparatus (in which case those who lose their eyes also lose their capacity to see). It will make no difference for the purposes of this paper.

Applying this to the matter at hand, one has the cognitive capacity to deploy a concept merely by virtue of possessing a conceptual apparatus—a mental constitution advanced enough to allow for the deployment of that concept given suitable training and stimulation. As before, possessing the capacity to deploy a concept does not imply that one can immediately or voluntarily deploy that concept. One might have to learn how to deploy it before actually being able to use it. To isolate this power, compare Socrates and a largemouth bass. Though neither Socrates nor the largemouth bass can actively deploy the concept NUCLEAR BOMB, there is clearly some sense in which Socrates is mentally capable of deploying this concept and the largemouth bass is not. Even if we assume that the bass has some basic conceptual apparatus capable of deploying a range simple concepts, the concept NUCLEAR BOMB surely exceeds its limits. This power, which Socrates possesses but the bass lacks, is the cognitive capacity to deploy that concept.

What is most crucial for our purposes is that possessing the cognitive capacity to deploy a concept does *not* entail that one possesses that concept, even partially, or that one has started acquiring that concept. This is illustrated vividly by Mary the scientist. Mary is isolated to a black and white room and prohibited from seeing anything red. All non-nativists should agree that Mary does not possess the primitive phenomenal concept RED. Her problem isn't that she can only imperfectly deploy this concept; it's that she cannot actively use that concept in thought *at all*. Her situation is comparable to that of a blind person, who has neither acquired nor started acquiring the phenomenal concept RED. Nevertheless, Mary does possess a certain kind of power to deploy this concept—namely, the *cognitive capacity* to deploy it. In other words, Mary has a conceptual apparatus that is capable of deploying the concept RED if put into the right circumstances. This is a power that Mary has but, say, earthworms do not. What this proves is that having the cognitive capacity to deploy a concept requires neither that one possess that concept nor that one has started coming into possession of that concept.

Early modern empiricists like John Locke clearly recognized this point. Locke notes that if having the capacity to know a truth or (we might add) entertain a concept is sufficient for the possession of that truth or concept, then it immediately follows that all

truths and concepts are innate, for it is uncontroversial that one must have the capacity to entertain a concept prior to actually doing so.[8] Since the debate between nativists and non-nativists is at the very least substantial, capacities cannot be sufficient for any relevant sense of possession.

Instead, a cognitive capacity to deploy concepts should be understood as a *precondition* for concept acquisition, not an element of it. A very different kind of power to deploy concepts is required for possession. The cognitive capacity, at most, enables one to receive or develop this other kind of power.

The above considerations enrich our understanding of the essentiality of experience. The essentiality of experience says that we gain the power to deploy primitive concepts, like RED, through experience. But *what kind* of power must be gained through experience? What our discussion reveals is that we cannot plausibly interpret the essentiality of experience as requiring that we gain the *capacity* to deploy primitive concepts through experience. The essentiality of experience is supposed to issue a constraint on concept acquisition, but the acquisition process does not involve coming into possession of a cognitive capacity to deploy concepts—if anything, the acquisition process presupposes this capacity. Furthermore, early modern empiricists like Locke adhered to the essentiality of experience if anyone did, and even they didn't think that experience bestows on us the capacity to deploy concepts.

So how should we interpret the essentiality of experience? I suggest we interpret it as requiring that we gain the "immediate ability" to deploy primitive concepts through experience. The immediate ability to deploy a concept is nothing fancy—it's the familiar power we ascribe to those who can readily use a concept in thought, even if they lack full mastery of it. This is what we're typically getting at when we talk about whether someone can deploy a concept or not. For instance, say I ask you to divide persons into two camps, those that can deploy the concept NUCLEAR BOMB and those that cannot. You would

[8] Locke 1975, Book I, Ch. 2, §5.

naturally sort persons such as very young children, Socrates, and uncontacted people groups into the *can't*-camp and most contemporary adults into the *can*-camp, even if they lack full mastery of the concept.[9] The salient difference between these camps is that, in the latter, the concept is primed and ready for active use in thought. This power is the immediate ability to deploy the concept NUCLEAR BOMB.

We can round out our description through example. When Mary steps outside her black and white room and finally experiences a red object, she is empowered to entertain thoughts involving the phenomenal concept RED. The concept is ready and available for immediate deployment in a way that it wasn't before leaving the room. She can now actively form thoughts about red things in a way that she couldn't previously. There may well be other more sophisticated abilities that Mary must gain before fully possessing or mastering this concept, such as the ability to (re)identify its instances, or to draw certain inferences with it, or to satisfy Evans' generality constraint (Evans 1982, 104). The immediate ability to deploy the concept RED is presupposed by and maybe even partially constitutive of these more sophisticated abilities. You couldn't, for instance, infer anything from the thought that something is red if you couldn't readily entertain thoughts involving RED in the first place. The immediate ability to deploy a concept is just this power to readily use the concept in thought.

The distinction between a cognitive capacity and an immediate ability is foreshadowed in Aristotle's distinction between a first potentiality and second potentiality in *De Anima* (Book II, §5). There he writes:

> We can speak of something as a knower either as when we say that man is a knower, meaning that man falls within the class of beings that know or have knowledge, or as when we are speaking of a man who possesses a knowledge of grammar; each of these has a potentiality, but not in the same way: the one because his kind or matter is such and such, the other because he can reflect when he wants to, if nothing external prevents him. (Aristotle 1991, 417a22-417b1)

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[9] For instance, is an atomic bomb the same thing as a nuclear bomb or merely a species of it? Does a nuclear bomb have to be powered by fission or do fusion bombs also count? Someone can use the concept NUCLEAR BOMB even if they cannot answer these questions.

Applying this to the discussion at hand, one has the potentiality to deploy concepts in the first sense simply because one's kind or matter (cognitive machinery) is such that one falls into the class of conceptual beings. Learning a concept marks the transition from this initial state into a state where one has the potential to deploy a concept in the second sense. This is the potential to deploy the concept "when he wants to, if nothing external prevents him." When one actualizes this second potentiality, deploying the concept in thought, this marks a transition from the "inactive possession" of the concept to its "active exercise" (417b1). My distinction between a cognitive capacity and an immediate ability might be thought of as a more metaphysically-neutral way of characterizing this same intuitive distinction.[10]

With this distinction in hand, we are now in a position to see the error in the prior power argument. Since the essentiality of experience is about the immediate ability to deploy primitive concepts, let's reformulate the argument in these terms.

THE PRIOR ABILITY ARGUMENT

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[10] I should also take this moment to disassociate my distinction from a similar but subtly different distinction drawn by Peter van Inwagen (1983, 10-12). van Inwagen's distinction between capacities and abilities rests primarily on whether the exercise of some power is *voluntary* or not. What we can call a "PVI capacity" is "an invariable disposition to react to certain determinate changes in the environment in certain determinate ways," whereas a "PVI ability" is "a power that is dispositional or reactive, but rather … a power to *originate* changes in the environment" (11). My own distinction is not tied to voluntariness as closely as this. For example, say you go to a lecture on WWII addressing the bombing of Hiroshima. You may involuntarily (or at least not voluntarily) deploy the concept NUCLEAR BOMB as you listen to the words of the speaker. This deployment exercises your immediate ability to deploy that concept, despite its being non-voluntary. If you were to place Socrates in that audience, this non-voluntary deployment would not occur in him because he only possesses the cognitive capacity to deploy NUCLEAR BOMB, not the immediate ability. This is the contrast I am after: whether the concept is *ready for immediate use*. Plausibly, being ready for immediate use in this way entails being voluntarily deployable, but (unlike a PVI ability) I do not wish to essentially characterize an immediate ability as a power whose exercise must be voluntary.

Premise 1	If both conceptualism and the essentiality of experience are true, then subject S gains the immediate ability to deploy primitive concept C through an experience involving the deployment of C.
Premise 2	If S has an experience involving C, then S has the immediate ability to deploy C prior to that experience.
Premise 3	If S has the immediate ability to deploy C prior to an experience involving C, then S cannot gain the immediate ability to deploy C through that experience.
Conclusion 1	Thus, S cannot gain the immediate ability to deploy C through an experience involving the deployment of C.
Conclusion 2	Therefore, it's not the case that conceptualism and the essentiality of experience are true.

Premise 1 is an implication of conceptualism and the essentiality of experience. Premise 3 is a truism. Premise 2, however, is false. Conceptualism doesn't require the immediate ability to deploy C prior to having an experience involving C. It only requires the *capacity* to deploy this concept.

I can prove this by describing a possible scenario in which a subject deploys C in an experience, yet lacks any immediate ability to deploy C prior to that experience. To describe such a scenario, I need to introduce the notion of what I call a "purely reflexive power". Innate reflexes are paradigm examples. Consider the patellar reflex. By striking the knee in a familiar manner, the leg moves. However, paraplegics can and often do retain this reflexive power to move their leg, despite having lost the immediate ability to do so. Consider also blinking. When an object quickly approaches your eye, you close your eyelid. However, you don't have the immediate ability to close your eyelid by virtue of possessing this purely reflexive power. For example, a severely brain damaged patient might retain this purely reflexive power while lacking any immediate ability to blink. What these examples show is that possessing a purely reflexive power to ϕ does not entail having the immediate ability to ϕ. At most, it entails having the capacity to ϕ.

Now we can look for a conceptualist-friendly account that only requires a purely reflexive power to deploy concepts prior to experience, knowing that if we find such an account, it will constitute a counterexample to Premise 2. Thankfully, such an account of

experience already exists. Thomas Reid argued that our natural constitution includes a variety of cognitive mechanisms that, when triggered, occasion the deployment of primitive concepts in a purely reflexive manner.[11] Just as the doctor's mallet or a rapidly approaching object triggers an innate reflex, so interaction with one's environment might trigger an innate cognitive mechanism resulting in the reflexive deployment of a primitive concept in experience.[12] As Sellars puts it, such concepts are "evoked or wrung from the perceiver" in experience (1956, 272). This kind of deployment doesn't require an immediate ability to deploy that concept any more than a reflexive jerk of the leg or blink of the eye requires the immediate ability to perform those actions. Mary, sitting in her black and white room, could possess a reflexive power to deploy the phenomenal concept RED waiting to be triggered. This would not entail that she had the immediate ability to deploy that concept, only the capacity. Therefore, we have at least one conceptualist-friendly account of experience—what we might call the "Reidian account"—that doesn't require having the immediate ability to deploy C prior to having an experience involving C. Premise 2 is false.

Maybe we can revise the prior power argument once again. If not the immediate ability, conceptualism may well require the cognitive *capacity* to deploy concepts prior to experience. Perhaps we can reformulate the argument in terms of this power.

THE PRIOR CAPACITY ARGUMENT

Premise 1 If both conceptualism and the essentiality of experience are true, then subject S gains the cognitive capacity to deploy primitive concept C through an experience involving the deployment of C.

Premise 2 If S has an experience involving C, then S has the cognitive capacity to deploy C prior to that experience.

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[11] See Reid 1997. Reid thought that the full perceptual process involved sensations in addition to conceptions, but that is not our focus here.

[12] Reid actually points to sensations rather than objects in the external world as the immediate triggers for our cognitive mechanisms, but this is not the feature of Reid's account that is important for our purposes.

Premise 3 If S has the cognitive capacity to deploy C prior to an experience involving C, then S cannot gain the cognitive capacity to deploy C through that experience.

Conclusion 1 Thus, S cannot gain the cognitive capacity to deploy C through an experience involving the deployment of C.

Conclusion 2 Therefore, it's not the case that conceptualism and the essentiality of experience are true.

Premise 2 is plausibly true. Premise 3 remains a truism. Premise 1, however, is false. As we saw above, the essentiality of experience does *not* require that one gain the cognitive capacity to deploy C through experience.

There is no kind of power to deploy concepts (that I have found) on which both Premise 1 and Premise 2 of the prior power argument are true. Perhaps there is some power that will do the trick, but it is incumbent on those who are defending the argument to produce it. As things stand, no such power has been put forward; so as things stand, the argument does not succeed.

What is especially tidy about this critique is that it gives us an explanation for why the prior power argument is so intuitive in the first place. Its plausibility comes from equivocating on "the power to deploy C". In Premise 1, we read it as:

Premise 1 If both conceptualism and the essentiality of experience are true, then subject S gains the power (i.e. the *immediate ability*) to deploy primitive concept C through an experience involving the deployment of C.

But when we reach Premise 2, a subtle shift occurs, and we read it as:

Premise 2 If S has an experience involving C, then S has the power (i.e. the *capacity*) to deploy C prior to that experience.

Thus, the argument looks compelling so long as we do not clarify precisely what kind of power is at issue.

In this section, I have dismissed a popular reason for thinking that conceptualism cannot honor the essentiality of experience. This clears the way for my positive project in the next section. Building off the Reidian account introduced above, I sketch a

conceptualist account of how we gain the immediate ability to deploy primitive concepts through experience.

§5 Acquiring the Immediate Ability to Deploy Concepts

Let us start with what I have called the "Reidian account", the central feature of which is that we have innate cognitive mechanisms that reflexively deploy primitive concepts when triggered. The deployment of these primitive concepts constitutes an experience (at least partially). In a nutshell, my proposal is that you gain the immediate ability to deploy primitive concept C by reflexively deploying C in experience.

Compare this to learning how to ride a bike. You gain the immediate ability to ride a bike by riding it with the help of training wheels, your parents, or some other aid. These assistants put you through the motions. The act of riding then familiarizes your body with how to engage in the activity. The necessary bodily motions are captured in muscle memory. With enough practice, you gain the immediate ability to ride the bike without external assistance. Something similar might occur in learning how to deploy primitive concepts. Innate reflexive powers play the role of training wheels or your parents. They put you through the mental motions, allowing you to deploy primitive concepts without possessing the skill to do so on your own. After deploying these concepts reflexively, your mind familiarizes itself with the activity and retains the power to do it non-reflexively. That is, there is something like "mental muscle memory". In this way, you gain the immediate ability to deploy that concept. I leave it to the sciences to articulate a more detailed account of how the act of deploying concepts confers on us these new powers.

An advantage of this view is that it fits naturally into a general account of learning-how: you begin learning how to perform basic activities by performing those activities in an unskilled manner. Babies begin learning how to move their bodies by reflexively moving their arms, legs, hands, faces, etc., and retaining the ability to do so on their own. (They then combine these basic abilities, learning ever more complex bodily movements.) Toddlers instinctually babble, learning how to make sounds that are eventually used in

making utterances. We can begin learning how to perform complex activities in the same way.[13] We begin learning how to ride a bike by riding it (without skill). We begin learning how to shoot a basketball by shooting it. We being learning how to type by typing. This is not a wholly novel or unfamiliar account of learning. Aristotle writes in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Ch. 1:

> Virtues, however, we acquire by first exercising them. The same is true with skills, since *what we need to learn before doing, we learn by doing*; for example, we become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by temperate actions, and courageous by courageous actions. (2004, 23; emphasis mine)

There are many activities that we begin learning how to perform by first performing them in an unskilled manner. What I am suggesting is that we begin learning how to deploy primitive concepts in the same way.[14]

Once acquired, of course, the Reidian account does not insist that concepts continue to be used in a purely reflexive manner in everyday experience. It may be that after gaining an initial conceptual repertoire by the above means, the deployment of concepts in experience becomes much less reflexive (perhaps falling somewhere in-between pure reflex and conscious intention).

This account honors the essentiality of experience. Prior to experience, the subject has only the purely reflexive power to deploy primitive concepts. Having this kind of reflexive power does not imply that one possesses those primitive concepts. Concept possession begins with the immediate ability to deploy a concept, and that sort of ability is acquired by the exercise of the aforementioned reflexive powers, in conjunction with mental muscle memory, in experience. In short, primitive concepts are acquired by using them in experience. Thus, the essentiality of experience is satisfied.

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[13] The claim is just that complex activities are *often* learned in this way, not that they *must* be.

[14] Or, more precisely, we gain *the immediate ability* to deploy primitive concepts by deploying them. The immediate ability to deploy a concept may just be the first step in learning how to deploy it.

The Reidian account may ultimately be wrong, but it is not *outlandishly* wrong. Roskies considers and dismisses the idea that one could acquire a concept by having an experience that deploys it:

> One may think that the conceptualist may deny 5 because he holds that in having an experience of redness one comes to have the concept RED: having the experience *is* acquiring the concept. However, there is no argument available as to why the mere fact that one has an experience with a certain content is an acceptable account of concept *acquisition*. To address this, one would either have to deny that there is any scientifically viable explanation of how acquisition occurs, appealing instead to miracles or magic, or one would have to invoke demonstrative concepts. (Roskies 2008, 639)

Roskies thinks the deployment of demonstrative concepts in experience is incompatible with conceptualism, thus the conceptualist is forced to abandon science and turn to "miracles and magic." For the record, Roskies's position on demonstrative concepts should not simply be granted (even if she's ultimately right). Nevertheless, even if we temporarily remove demonstrative concepts from the picture, there is still nothing magical or anti-scientific about the Reidian account just described. Deploying a concept reflexively familiarizes one with the act in such a way that gives one the immediate ability to do it again, and that immediate ability is the first step in concept possession. There is no reason science could not give a physical explanation of these processes.

There are sure to be other concerns with the Reidian account. Many of these concerns are just as sure to be misdirected. The Reidian account is avowedly incomplete in at least two ways. It is focused exclusively on (i) the *initial* acquisition of (ii) *primitive* concepts—that is, on how we begin to form the foundations our conceptual structures. This leaves many important, and potentially problematic, dimensions of concept acquisition untouched. However, the fact that the Reidian account does not address every problem that could arise in the fuller acquisition process is no objection at all, unless it can somehow be shown that the Reidian account rules out any satisfactory solution to these remaining difficulties.

Thus, regarding (ii), the Reidian account says nothing of how more complex concepts are acquired. But this is no objection to the account. It is safe to assume that the possession of primitive concepts will enable the acquisition of complex concepts in some way or another. The Reidian account need not take a position on *how* this expansion of our conceptual repertoire occurs. Seemingly everyone needs such an account, and there is no apparent reason to think that conceptualism can't help itself to whichever one wins out.[15]

Regarding (i), the Reidian account is not a full account of primitive concept acquisition; it is about the *first step* in primitive concept acquisition. It is a patch that fuller conceptualist accounts of concept acquisition (e.g. Gennaro 2012) can use to bypass the prior power argument and ensure that their theories honor the essentiality of experience. Indeed, there are many dimensions to the Reidian account that I have left undeveloped that would need to be filled in by a complete account. For example, we have seen that one must have the capacity to deploy concepts prior to experience, but I have not stated whether this prior capacity should be parsed out in terms of individual capacities to deploy *specific* concepts (think of a series of cognitive mechanisms, each exclusively directed towards the production of some one specific concept C) or in terms of some *general* capacity to deploy certain types of concepts (think of some one cognitive mechanism capable of producing a range of concepts C_1-C_N). This is purposefully so, as either option is available to the conceptualist.

Reid himself seemed to opt for a mixture of both approaches. For one, Reid posited cognitive mechanisms specially dedicated to producing concepts such as the concept of causation, of mind-independent objects, and of primary qualities such as hardness (to name a few). Such mechanisms were triggered by sensations of various sorts. For instance, the lattermost mechanism was occasioned by tactile sensations such as one feels when pressing down against a hard surface. This resulted in the concept FIRM

[15] See Gennaro 2012, Ch. 7, for a conceptualist account of how, starting with certain core primitive concepts, we can use implicit learning to expand our catalogue of concepts.

ADHESION AMONG THE PARTS OF AN OBJECT. Reid supplemented these specific mechanisms with a more general mechanism which deployed demonstrative concepts. These demonstrative concepts made reference to their triggering conditions and the causes of those conditions (e.g. THE CAUSE OF THESE SENSATIONS), and so took on determinate content via the causal relations involved in their production. Putting these all together, we get the following story. A subject causally interacts with a hard material body producing sensations within the mind of the subject. These sensations trigger several specific conceptual mechanisms within the subject as well as a demonstrative one. Together, they result in the conception THE PARTS OF THE MIND-INDEPENDENT BODY CAUSING THESE SENSATIONS ARE FIRMLY ADHERING TO ONE ANOTHER.

Reid's particular way of fleshing out the story, while instructive, is not normative for "the Reidian account" that I have developed here. Conceptualists are welcome to fill in the details as they think best. For example, which concepts (if any) have specific mechanisms exclusively geared towards their production? A contemporary conceptualist may provide a different list than the one proposed by Reid.[16] A conceptualist might also posit different *triggers* for these specific mechanisms. Instead of being triggered by conscious sensations, perhaps they are triggered by some kind of subconscious, proto-subjective sensitivity to one's environment.[17] Furthermore, a conceptualist might put

[16] Gennaro 2012, 189-198, for instance, may wish to posit mechanisms specifically geared towards the production of certain core concepts such as OBJECT, SPACE, TIME, CAUSE, NUMBER, SELF, and others.

[17] See McDowell 1994. Opting for McDowell's approach would help the conceptualist maintain that perceptual experience is conceptual *all the way down*. However, if you don't mind opting for a form of limited conceptualism in which there are both conceptual and non-conceptual elements in the broader perceptual process (see Bengson, Grube, and Korman 2011) you could say that the triggers are sensations (à la Reid), non-conceptual representations (à la non-conceptual representationalists), or direct acquaintance with the objects of perception (à la relationalists)

more or less emphasis on specific or general conceptual mechanisms, perhaps going so far as to explain our conceptual capacities entirely in terms of one or the other.[18]

The Reidian account remains neutral with respect to all of these options. Now, in fleshing out these various positions, there will no doubt be serious difficulties that must be confronted. For instance, appealing to specific cognitive mechanisms raises worries of nativism,[19] and there are well-know issues with the conceptualist appeal to demonstrative concepts (what are you demonstrating towards if not non-conceptual content?).[20] Even still, the problem would not lie within the Reidian account *per se*. Thus, such objections, even if sound, are not objections to the thesis of this paper—which is that, whatever other problems conceptualism may have, it can nonetheless honor the essentiality of experience. The same thing can be said with respect to concerns about the remaining steps in the acquisition process or to problems with conceptualism more generally. Such objections, even if sound, are peripheral to the task of this paper.[21]

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[18] A conceptualist might parse everything out in terms of specific capacities—each concept we deploy is produced by a cognitive mechanism specially directed towards the production of that specific concept. Another conceptualist might take things in the opposite direction, forgoing any specific mechanisms and explaining our conceptual capacities (at least at this initial stage in the overall acquisition process) exclusively in terms of the general capacity to deploy demonstrative concepts. Conceptualists who lean heavily on demonstrative concepts include McDowell 1994 and Brewer 1999.

[19] Notice, however, that having the mere capacity to deploy concepts prior to experience (say, by virtue of a purely reflexive mechanism) does not imply the possession of those concepts prior to experience. Thus, if nativism is characterized by the possession of concepts prior to experience, I do not see how possessing specific reflexive mechanisms would imply nativism. That being said, the proper characterization of nativism is, of course, itself a matter of significant debate.

[20] E.g. Campbell 2002 and Roskies 2010. In my judgment, Bengson, Grube, and Korman 2011 adequately resolve such worries for the conceptualist, though it involves adopting a more limited form of conceptualism than some conceptualists will be comfortable with.

[21] That being said, my sense is that many of the general objections to conceptualism are addressed by adopting the new framework for conceptualism suggested by John Bengson, Enrico Grube, and Daniel Korman.

§6 Conclusion

As we conclude, let us turn to what I *have* accomplished rather than what I have not. First, I defended conceptualism against the common objection that it cannot honor the essentiality of experience. At first blush, it may seem that a conceptual experience presupposes and so cannot explain the relevant power to deploy primitive concepts, but conceptual experience only presupposes the *cognitive capacity* to deploy concepts, allowing us to gain the *immediate ability* to deploy them through experience. Second, I proposed a conceptualist-friendly account that honors the essentiality of experience. On this account, we gain the immediate ability to deploy primitive concepts by reflexively deploying them in experience and replicating this activity via "mental muscle memory." What this shows is that conceptualism is better positioned to account for the acquisition of primitive concepts than previously thought.[22]

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