

Eva Schmidt's *Modest Nonconceptualism*

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In her impressively thorough and detailed *Modest Nonconceptualism*, Eva Schmidt addresses one of the live disputes amongst those who wish to ascribe representational content to sensory experience: whether we should think of sensory experience as, like belief, a concept-involving state (in a sense that would need to be made clear).

Conceptualists, such as McDowell (1996) and Brewer (1999), think that we should. States of experience play a rationalising role, and the objects of experience are presented to us as objective in experience and empirical thought. But this is possible only if we think of experience as representing the world to be a certain way by constitutively involving the (passive) exercise of a certain understanding one has of the objects of one's experience, they argue.

Nonconceptualists, such as Peacocke (1983, 1992) and Tye (2000, 2006), demur. Such representationalists tend to say that only if we think of experience as representing the world without that constitutively involving the subject exercising an understanding (if any) of all that they experience can we satisfactorily account for the phenomenology of experience, the possibility of experiences with contradictory content, and the role experience plays with respect to grounding our possession of concepts. And in any case: the relevant epistemological and intentional data which motivate Conceptualism can be handled readily by such a view.

Schmidt sides with the Nonconceptualists. She resourcefully defends a variety of Nonconceptualism which she labels *Modest Nonconceptualism*. As I understand it, Modest Nonconceptualism consists in the conjunction of a certain modal claim, which leaves open what kind of nonconceptual content experience has, and a further claim which fills-in that lacuna. The modal claim is this: for at least certain elements of the content of a certain experiential state, it is possible for the subject to be in that state without putting into operation concepts which specify those elements.¹ The further thesis is

¹This is the thesis Schmidt labels 'General NC-ism_{min}' Schmidt (2015: 46).

that the nonconceptual content of experience is to be identified with Peacocke's (1992) scenario content.

The book is split into 9 chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the debate and an overview of what is to come. Chapters 2-3 provide some very useful set-up. Chapter 2 distinguishes different notions of content, different notions of a concept, and different sorts of possession conditions for concepts, where Conceptualists are said to think of concepts as Fregean modes of presentation. Chapter 3 draws the by now well-known distinction between Content Conceptualism, according to which the content of every experiential state is composed of concepts, and State Conceptualism, which Schmidt plausibly identifies with the claim that every experiential state constitutively involves the exercise of those concepts which characterise the content of the experience. State Nonconceptualism and Content Nonconceptualism are identified with the denials of the corresponding Conceptualist theses and differing modal strengths of each distinguished. Schmidt then provides fresh defence of the *State-to-Content Principle*, according to which a state is conceptual if, and only if, its content is composed of concepts, so that the distinction between the two sorts of Conceptualist positions effectively collapses, making it possible to deductively infer one from the other, and likewise the two Nonconceptualist positions.

Chapters 4-6 explore three styles of argument for Nonconceptualism. Chapter 4 focuses on phenomenological arguments: the argument from fineness of grain and Kelly's (2001) argument from what he calls the 'situation dependence' of experience. Schmidt defends both arguments, although she points out that only the first supports the modal claim associated with Modest Nonconceptualism. Chapter 5 develops and defends Crane's (1988) argument from the possibility of experiences with contradictory content into an argument for Modest Nonconceptualism's modal claim. And Chapter 6 focuses on issues for the Conceptualist concerning concept acquisition: Martin's (1992) argument from memory experience, the well-known argument from animal and infant perception, and an argument which focuses on how the Conceptualist might account for empirical concept acquisition in general and demonstrative concept acquisition in particular. Of those, only the second, Schmidt suggests, supports the Modest Nonconceptualist's modal claim.

Chapters 7-8 address the two core arguments for Conceptualism. The Sellars-inspired argument which appeals to the supposed rationalising role of experiential states is the subject of chapter 7, and Schmidt argues there that on three separate construals of that argument, her Modest Nonconceptualist can tackle it whilst allowing for experience to play a rationalising role. Likewise, she argues in chapter 8 that her favoured Nonconceptualism can handle the other Conceptualist desideratum: that the content of experience

and empirical belief can only count as representing an objective world if for former is conceptual. Chapter 9 provides a summary.

Schmidt's book is admirably rich, intricate and manifests a welcome concern for detail. There is much to be said in response. Here I focus on two issues: (i) the effectiveness of a certain dilemma Schmidt confronts the Conceptualist with in the context of her discussion of the argument from fineness of grain and (ii) whether Schmidt's response to the Sellarsian motivation for Conceptualism is convincing.

A Dilemma for the Conceptualist? During her discussion of the fineness of grain argument, Schmidt considers at length McDowell's (1996) influential demonstrative concept response. According to that response, for any property presented to one in experience the determinateness of which supposedly outstrips one's conceptual capacities, that property is in fact presented to one by dint of the experiential exercise of a demonstrative concept, for example, in the case of colour: *that shade*, which serves to pick out just that property. Schmidt suggests that the strategy ultimately fails because the proponent of it faces a dilemma.² Either the proponent of the view individuates the phenomenal character of sensory experience by appeal to the (at least partly demonstrative) content of the experience or by appeal to those particulars and properties such content represents. The problem with the former is that 'When I focus on the phenomenal character of my experience... I seem to be presented with the properties of objects around me – but I cannot notice any modes of presentation of these properties' (Schmidt, 2015: 93). The problem with the latter is that it commits the proponent of the view to disjunctivism about sensory experience and this, Schmidt says, 'would be to abandon conceptualism' (*Ibid.*: 96).

There are some elucidatory issues generated by this. First, it's not clear whether the two horns of the dilemma are mutually exclusive, at least for the proponent the demonstrative strategy. That's because the identity of a particular demonstrative concept is partly constituted by its reference to whatever particular or property it picks out, so that if an aspect of phenomenal character is constituted by a demonstrative, then it also counts as constituted by the particular or property picked out by that demonstrative. And second, it's not clear why the dilemma essentially has anything to do with the demonstrative strategy: why wouldn't it confront any version of Conceptualism?

Elucidatory issues aside, the dilemma seems surmountable. Against the first horn, which is effectively that the ascription of Fregean content to experience is incompatible with its transparency, the Conceptualist could say that this just proves that Fregean senses are themselves transparent with respect to their referents. And with respect to the second horn, why is Conceptualism incompatible with disjunctivism? Brewer (1999)

²Schmidt (2015: 93-96)

and McDowell (1996) are both plausibly read as endorsing disjunctivism, and it is not clear that there is anything incoherent about their doing so. Perhaps Schmidt's thought is that the ascription of representational content to experience at all needs to be motivated by the need to account for the common phenomenal character of perception and a corresponding hallucination. Whilst many representationalists motivate their position in this way, however, the Conceptualist has distinctive motives: those explored in Schmidt's chapters 7-8.

The Rational Role of Experience. Suppose we want to subscribe to the Epistemic Internalist view that a justifiably held belief is a belief held in the light of an adequate epistemic reason. And suppose, moreover, that we want to combine that view with the empiricist-friendly and (modestly) Foundationalist idea that a belief brought about by an experience is thereby a justified belief. Then we'd end up subscribing to the view that beliefs brought about by experiences are thereby beliefs held in the light of reasons: experience plays a rationalising role. A well-known argument for Conceptualism begins with the correctness of this epistemological picture and adds the further Sellarsian thought that states can play a rationalising role only if they have representational and conceptual content.

Part of Schmidt's response here is to sketch a theory of perceptual justification purportedly consistent with the epistemological picture described whilst also being consistent with her Modest Nonconceptualism. To take her own example, consider one's visual experience of the computer screen in front of one, which causes one to believe that there is a computer screen in front of one. If the content of the experience is accurate, then there really is a computer screen in front of one and hence the belief it causes is true: the causal transition from experience to belief is truth-conducive. Moreover, given that one possesses the concepts which characterise the content of one's perceptual belief, upon having the visual experience of the computer screen one will find it 'primitively compelling' (here, Schmidt again borrow from Peacocke (1992)) to exercise those concepts in forming that belief. Together with the truth-conduciveness of the causal transition, this suffices for the belief to count as justified by one's experience.

Again, this raises some elucidatory issues. This story about perceptual justification is supposed to be consistent with the sort of Internalist picture the Conceptualist is committed to. But what is it that constitutes the reason in the light of which one holds one's perceptual belief? The content of one's experience? That one is having the experience? I did not find it immediately clear what the answer here is supposed to be.

Moreover, there is room for the Conceptualist to ask: is finding it primitively compelling to form the belief that *p* upon having an experience with a suitably related content supposed to be a further *state of mind* the subject is in? If so, the Conceptualist is going

to ask what the nature of this state is. It had better not be a *belief* that it would be suitable for one to believe that *p* given one's experiential circumstances, for then the (modestly) Foundationalist component of the theory is lost. But if it is not a belief then it would seem to be a *sui generis* kind of mental state. At this point, the Conceptualist would be within their rights to say that the introduction of such a state is *ad hoc*. If, on the other hand, finding it primitively compelling is not a state of mind, then, the Conceptualist could say, it would have to be a kind of sub-personal process which causally mediates the transition from experience to belief. But if that's so, then the Conceptualist is again within their rights to question why the story now being told is substantially different from a Reliabilist picture.

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