
Nonconceptual Epicycles¹

SONIA SEDIVY

1 Introduction

Is some perceptual content nonconceptual — in the sense that a person need not possess “matching concepts” for “the general features entering into those contents”? (Tye, 1995, p. 139) This certainly looks like a question. But what it asks is not genuinely in question *if* we keep in place the background commitments that make positing nonconceptual content not only sensible but also inevitable. This question — Is some perceptual content nonconceptual, *provided* we keep in place the commitments that make positing such content sensible and needed? — quite evidently needs no discussion since its answer can only be yes. The question can be refocused slightly while delivering an equally inevitable verdict. Is all perceptual content conceptual (so that there is no nonconceptual content), *provided* we keep in place the background commitments that make positing nonconceptual content sensible and inevitable? Like its equivalent, this question can only have one answer — in this case, no — needing no discussion either.

Why make such an apparently obvious point? Because the trend is to zero-in on the details of various competing proposals without addressing the background commitments that will make those details seem sensible or just

¹ I would like to thank my editor, Christine van Geen for her most helpful comments and suggestions. As always, I would also like to thank William Seager for his insightful criticisms and wonderful conversation. This paper has a companion, or better yet, sister paper with which, like a Siamese twin, it is joined at the hip. The two papers present a package, joined in what I present here briefly in Part I, and developed in detail in “Perceptual Engagement with the World, starting afresh with disjunctivism.”

the opposite. This trend seems to prevail among a heterogeneous variety of proposals in favor of factoring perceptual experience into conceptual and nonconceptual contents. Rather than focusing on the details of competing proposals for and against nonconceptual contents, we need to pause to examine the commitments on both sides. Why not explore alternatives to the predominant status quo, alternatives that urge thorough transformations in our understanding of ourselves, transformations that displace certain seemingly inevitable issues and solutions?

Here is a question that we might ask in place of the earlier apparent questions, once we change our focus from details to background commitments.

Would there be any reason to posit nonconceptual content if the world that persons experience is not a brute presence but a range of thinkables, so that it is a genuine possibility that the world and our experiences, and the world and our thoughts interpenetrate?

In such a transformation of our understanding of ‘our place in the physical universe’ – as we tend to say when we acculturate undergraduates to the issues in contemporary theory of mind – the need to posit nonconceptual content does not arise because perceptual content can be explained without controversy as just what it seems to be: experiential content that engages or involves individuals and their determinate properties in the world. As things stand today, a range of revisionary work spanning across metaphysics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind and theory of knowledge is needed to make this sort of view available: that the richness and fine grain of perceptual content is the richness and fine grain of determinate properties in the world under perceptual modes of presentation. That is why the issue is nothing less than constitutive. Should we change our philosophical understanding of ourselves in transformative ways – transformations that imply that personal content is and can only be thoroughly conceptual?

I will be arguing that the answer to this question is ‘yes.’ (i) Perceptual content involves individuals in their perceptible determinate properties. (ii) Perceptual content involves determinate properties in a way that relies on our conceptual capacities no less than on the properties. Experience that involves determinate properties is not pre- or non-conceptual.

This is the conceptualist proposal. I divide the proposal into two principal components to indicate points of divergence with theorists who propose that the rich, fine grain of our perceptual experiences is a nonconceptual content. The first key point of divergence is whether the fine grain of perceptual experience is to be understood internally or contextually. Some but not all proposals for nonconceptual contents are internalist, casting nonconceptual contents as determined by (or supervenient on) facts about the indi-

vidual perceiver. However, some nonconceptualists and conceptualists share the belief that the qualitative character of perceptual experience needs an externalist explanation that includes broader contextual factors. Yet this shared understanding immediately divides over the question whether our conceptual capacities are an integral element in our perceptual capacity to engage with properties in the world.

Perhaps it is too strong to suggest that what is at issue is a paradigm shift as my title suggests. What seems undeniable is that there is ‘business as usual’ in theory of mind – recognizably normal ways of posing issues and setting about addressing them – with fringes of suggestions that do not quite mesh here and there. One such recalcitrant nub coalesces around the view that all personal content is conceptual since this implication seems to disturb ‘business as usual’ into a defensive posture, defensive in the well-understood sense that ‘the best defense is offense.’ But at least the suggestion of something approaching a paradigm shift might be provocative enough to re-channel the debate somewhat. To place the issues genuinely under scrutiny, debate needs to address the commitments that hold the need for something like nonconceptual content in place and alternative commitments that displace that need.

At least this is my view. I cannot speak for McDowell and Brewer – the culprits usually identified as making various mistakes in their arguments for the thoroughly conceptual nature of human mentality. In this article, I speak only for myself, leaving it to readers to wonder whether McDowell and Brewer would agree with my suggestions, if readers might be so inclined. My task is how to make us genuinely confront our commitments rather than only the details of competing proposals – all in the space of an article. This is the challenge that this article faces.

Yet the stakes are even higher. To explain, I should acknowledge having already made some attempts at coaxing the debate away from a normal focus on details to discussion of constitutive commitments. But it seems those attempts were not recognizable as discussions of nonconceptual contents for the most part. To show what does not seem to work, let me mention how those attempts went. One article explicitly tried to shift attention from the details of current proposals to background commitments by counterpoising Sellars’ and Wittgenstein’s ideas about perception.² The idea was to confront some of Wittgenstein’s ‘outside of any paradigm’ investigations of perception with Sellars’ work. Sellars is the foil because it was his influential work in the 1950’s that set-up ‘business as usual’ for the remainder of

² Sedivy, (2004a) “Wittgenstein’s Diagnosis of Empiricism’s Third Dogma: Why perception is not an amalgam of sensation and conceptualization.”

the twentieth century, and now apparently, for the twenty-first as well. That is, after a crystalline and virtuoso demolition of the “framework of givenness,” Sellars opts for the conservative option of rehabilitating sensory impressions as purely causal ingredients of experience by cleansing away any epistemic role. I, at least, find this trajectory stunning – powerful, poignant, for better and for worse.

In another attempt, I argued for thinking about personal contents – or simply, the mind – as contents that lack vehicles.³ Part of the point of that alternative way of thinking about ourselves is that it is part and parcel of showing that personal contents are conceptual that there is nothing like nonconceptual content at the ‘personal level’ – since that is one form of a content/vehicle confusion.

The discussion, needless to say, remains one about the details of proposals (a list of ever-growing references is surely not needed to prove this point). One might just note how John McDowell's proposal that all content is conceptual is treated within debates over nonconceptual content. Such debates proceed swiftly to the details of McDowell's proposal about demonstrative concepts – perhaps with a nod to McDowell's exclusively ‘epistemic’ motivation – without considering what is surely something of a sea change in our understanding of persons and world.⁴

So the full challenge for this article is: how might one address the issues so they connect *recognizably* with more normal debates over nonconceptual content and so they *rechannel* those debates towards underlying issues?

For better or for worse, given the need for brevity, this paper will focus the discussion in the following three steps. The opening section sets-up the issues with a brief examination of perceptual experience from the first person viewpoint. My proposal is that perception is a mode of engagement with individuals and properties to the level of determinacy relevant for hu-

³ Sedivy, (2004b), “Minds: Contents without Vehicles.”

⁴ For very recent examples, see Kelly (2001) and Heck Jr. (2000). Here is Kelly's statement: “McDowell and Brewer ... are motivated by a certain kind of epistemological concern ... by the need to make sense of our capacity to have beliefs with empirical content – that is, beliefs that are grounded in, or justified by, experience. (p. 402)” Here is Heck: “... McDowell argues that perceptual experience must be within “the space of reasons,” that perception must be able to give us reasons for, that is, to justify, our beliefs about the world: And, according to him, no state that does not have conceptual content can be a reason for a belief. (p. 483)” To sum it all up, here is the sub-entry on “Conceptualist Views of Content” from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on “The Contents of Perception.” “McDowell (1994), Sedivy (1996) and Brewer (1999) ... defend [experience conceptualism and the same-content thesis] on the grounds that experiences can provide justification for beliefs only if these theses are true. Peacocke (2001a), Byrne (1996), Heck (2000) and others have objected to these ‘epistemic’ defenses of experience conceptualism...”

man (or animal) complex activity. The second section goes on to explain perceptual engagement with the world by carefully examining Gareth Evans' work in *Varieties of Reference*. Gareth Evans is usually held up as suggesting nonconceptual contents way back when in the early 1980's. Yet he also tried to suggest that the best in Frege can marry the best in Russell. The issue here is that though Evans' suggestion of nonconceptual contents is often cited, the larger project within which that proposal occurs is not. But it is the larger project that opens the more radical theoretical space that conceptualist positions occupy. Evans tried to show that we are capable of genuinely singular thought that involves individuals under modes of presentation. This is precisely what conceptualists propose: that perception is a genuinely singular representational capacity that involves individuals – *and their properties as well, of course* – under modes of presentation. Was Evans mistaken in the whole point of *Varieties of Reference* while managing to interject one sensible proposal? Making good sense of Evans' overarching project yields resources from philosophy of language with which to explain the sort of perceptual content that careful phenomenological scrutiny reveals in the first section.

If we can see our way to countenancing that perceptual content is best understood as a true marriage of Frege and Russell – not merely a marriage of convenience – the chief problem that confronts the conceptualist proposal is that perceptual experiences do not seem to satisfy the 're-identification' condition on conceptual contents. This is a problem because it is a hallmark of conceptual contents that insofar as one can identify something one can also re-identify it. The third and final section solves the problem and eliminates the principal objection to the conceptualist proposal in normal debates. My solution turns on showing that the problem cases where re-identification fails in fact point to the conceptual nature of perceptual engagement.

2 Perceptual Engagement with the World

Let's start by examining what perceptual experience is like from the first person viewpoint. Three principal features (or aspects) stand out. All three strike me with equal wonder though not all three receive airtime in theoretical discussions of perception. I see individual members of kinds and determinate instances of properties and what I see I cannot *retain* – let alone recall – in its determinacy as my eyes move away.

Consider walking through a fall forest ablaze with colorful leaves all around. The myriad irregular superposed shapes and colors – of leaves,

twigs, berries and branches – are present to me in their determinacy and in my understanding of them. To note this is to note the following. (i) It is always something that I see rather than a “?” that belongs to no category at my disposal (since an I-know-not-what-it-is is as richly informed by my understanding as the leaves or deer that I might see). This is the dreaded conceptualist bit. (ii) What I see, I see determinately (since even a blurry grey fog or blurry lettering is determinately blurry just as it is).⁵ This is my proposal concerning the well agreed upon ‘richness’ of perceptual experience. But in this paper, my argument for the property-involving nature of human perception starts from a yet unnoted third aspect: (iii) determinacy is not retained as the eyes move away.

Consider my forest walk again. Often, I cannot help but stop and try to take in all that beauty, to impress it within myself so that I might remember it. What I find is that I cannot retain the determinately detailed scene within myself across the instant that I look away, only to look back again immediately. This is true of all perception; we just do not notice this fact or highlight it when we turn to theorizing about perception. You can examine whether this is true of your perception – anytime, anywhere. You will find that from moment to moment you cannot retain a preceding perceptual experience in its determinacy once you look away – let alone recall it with equal determinacy days or months later. This is true however ‘simple’ or ‘complex’ the content of the perceptual experience might be – a single leaf or blade of grass, or a forest vista.

The datum that needs explaining is that: one is not able to *retain* or *maintain* a perceptual experience with equal determinacy as one’s eyes shift away, let alone to remember or recall the experience (after some interval) with the same determinacy as the original. I am suggesting that careful scrutiny of lived experience shows that there is an important lacuna in our initial theoretical descriptions of perceptual experience and hence in the catalogue of issues that theory of perception needs to address both experimentally and philosophically. The inability to retain or maintain our perceptual experiences is important theoretically because it indicates that perceptual content is object- and property-involving rather than self-standing. That is, the best explanation of our inability to retain a perceptual experience in its determinacy is that such experience involves its objects and properties. This is my suggestion. To point to the best explanation is to point to a much needed avenue of future research. (Though there are experimental findings that already bear on this phenomenological datum. For example, one line of

⁵ Please see my “Perceptual Engagement with the World” for an extended discussion of this point.

research that seems relevant concerns change blindness, our inability to notice changes in a scene to which we have had long exposure.⁶)

Consider that self-standing representational content -- that does *not* depend on its objects and properties causally and does *not* involve the objects and properties in the representational content -- can be maintained or recalled in the absence of the represented individuals and properties. The hallmark of such contents is that they can be entertained in the absence of the represented objects and properties and hence recalled in their absence as well. What affects our ability to entertain and recall self-standing contents in the absence of the represented individuals and properties are contingent factors of representational cost, storage and access. These are the sorts of factors that affect retrieval. But the failure to retain a perceptual experience in its original determinate detail cannot be explained as a failure to recall self-standing contents that is owing to contingent factors that affect retrieval. This is because the factors that affect retrieval -- such as the "costliness" of storing complex content and organizational problems of storing complex content in a way that allows for efficient access -- do not come into effect in the momentary interval as one's eyes shift.

Perceptual experience confronts us with two problems, only one of which might be explainable in terms of memory deficits, even the sorts of deficits that affect short term memory. To be sure, perceptual experiences cannot be recalled with matching determinacy. But I am suggesting that perceptual experience poses a hard issue that must not be conflated with questions about recall: why does the determinate detail of perceptual experience outrun our ability to retain or maintain it? Is it because there is simply too much detail to store even for a momentary interval? Or is it because the experience involves the objects and properties so that when the objects and properties are no longer involved, the determinate detail is not available either? What is the better explanation? If the determinate detail is available during the experience because the experience is awareness of a representation that is not object-involving -- then that representation cannot be too costly to maintain for another split second because precisely that cost has been feasible up to the moment the eyes turn away.⁷

⁶ See O'Regan, J.K., Rensink, R.A., Clark, J.J. (1999); Rensink, R.A., O'Regan, J.K., Clark, J.J., (1997).

⁷ Here is a simple illustrative way to cast this point that raises an instructive objection. If I (or rather, my sub-personal Central Nervous System or CNS processes) could make my own pictures or movies at the determinate detail of perceptual experience, and if perceptual experience really is experience of such movies, then there is no reason I couldn't hold onto and 'watch' -- or at least utilize -- a given 'frame' of such a movie a split second longer. If relevant subpersonal CNS processes make determinate movies, there should not be the differ-

The hypothesis at issue is that perception is determinate and that its determinacy is an object- and property involving kind of content. One relevant consideration is that complex action must deal with change as it occurs in real-time. The activity in the first person datum I offered – that of looking at the leaves of trees while walking along a peaceful forest trail – does not raise in any obvious way the need for dealing with change as it occurs. But any number of different examples could be raised where this need would be vivid – such as hunting a deer in that same forest, or preferably, watching birds, or skiing down its icy hillsides after the leaves have fallen – as well as examples that switch scenarios altogether such as our need to drive on multi-lane highways at 120 km/h. Yet when it comes to the functional unity – or constitutive interdependence – of perception and action, examples drawn from animal life seem more vivid. We might turn to the daily dance of the food chain among gazelles and their kin with lions and cheetahs on an African savannah. The ambient habitat for all of these animals is filled with ever so slightly moving stripes and spots – of leaves, of grass, of shadows, of light, of other animals, friend and foe alike. Everything blurs and shimmers slightly with the rising heat. All parties need to note *any* unusual movement of potentially *any* of the myriad stripes or spots, however slight, *as* it occurs – so as to burst into chase or flight. How is this best achieved?

By continuous update of representational content that does not involve the individuals and properties? Or by presenting the individuals and properties? That is, by content that depends on and involves the individuals and properties? Considering the costliness of updating a representation of such a complex natural scene – and the organizational difficulty of ensuring immediate access to just the needed portion of the ambient scene (also known as the frame problem) – suggests that the best solution to the problem, and hence the best explanation, is that animals are perceptually engaged with their habitat, engagements that involve the individuals and properties that their activities concern. The inter-dependence of perception and action indicates that the best explanation for real-time activity is that it is mutually supported by and supports object- and property-involving representations –

ences that we can note at every moment of our waking lives. This is my point. But someone might object that when we watch movies in movie theatres, what we see are discrete frames (or pictures) with a shuttered interval of 13 milliseconds between each frame. This seems to suggest that we do retain an image for a small time interval – 13 milliseconds. But who is the “we” in question? Movie-watching demonstrates that: (i) human subpersonal processes can maintain an image for 13 milliseconds; whereas (ii) a person does not detect intervals of 13 milliseconds. The phenomenological datum stands. As a person turns her eyes away, she can no longer retain what she just saw in anything like the determinate detail of the experience itself. Many thanks to William Seager for raising this objection.

representations that up-date ‘for free’ with the changing nature of the surroundings. Such representations change as the world changes – thanks to the world.⁸

I am invoking two ideas that are fraught with difficulty to explain the nature of perceptual experience at the first person perspective: that perceptual experience is *determinate* and that it is a mode of *engagement*. Explaining engagement is the work of the next section. To avert any misunderstanding from the outset, let’s close this section with a couple of points about determinacy and determinate properties. It is important to note that the concept highlights what might seem to be two different points about perception, yet is really one. First, individuals and their properties are determinate. It might be helpful to note that definite and determinate are related concepts. What are ‘out there’ in the world are determinate or definite individuals and their properties. Insofar as complex activity requires engagement with individuals and properties, then it is with determinate individuals and determinate properties that complex animals engage. But this is not the only relevant factor when we consider perception. Perceptual experience is not simply individual- and property-dependent, it is a mode of engagement – as we have already noted and as I will argue. It is not simply the determinate individuals and their properties ‘out there, in the world’ that our perceptions depend on causally, but those individuals and properties under relevant perceptual modes of presentation (to put the point using one set of well-known philosophical resources). This is to stress that perceptual engagement is a representational capacity. What we enjoy perceptually is content, albeit a distinctive individual- and property-involving content that presents individuals and properties perceptually. Perceptual content is distinguished by its qualitative richness. This is the second fact that the notion of determinacy captures. Perception’s qualitative richness is predominantly cast as a richness of information. But to say that perceptual engagement is determinate – in that it presents and involves determinate individuals and properties – is to say that the qualitative richness of our experience is in the world rather than something we have ‘received’ along an informational channel (or something that supervenes on what we have received along an informational channel, etc). When it comes to perception, the two senses of determinacy belong together. The

⁸ Though I cannot expand on this point within the scope of the present paper, I hope it is clear that conceptualism is in step with the growing trend in theories of mind to explain perception as a functional unity with activity, and to explain ourselves as “embodied and embedded” – indeed, my approach adds fuel to this fire. See for example, Hurley (1998) and Haugeland (1998).

notion of determinacy relates the ‘richness’ of perceptual content and the world-involving nature of such content.

Before I go on to make this case in detail, here is a summary of what this introductory section aimed to accomplish. In the first instance, the aim was to show that what philosophers have recently been referring to as the richly detailed nature of perceptual content is just what it seems – engagement with determinate properties in the world. And there is nothing about engagement with determinate properties that suggests that such a capability is not or cannot be conceptual. To point to the broad outlines of an explanation of the way in which determinate property-involving content is conceptual, let’s turn to the work of Gareth Evans – as paradoxical as this may seem.

3 Gareth Evans and Fregean Singular Thought: the Letter and the Spirit

Proposals for nonconceptual contents often cite Gareth Evans’ suggestion in *The Varieties of Reference* that perceptual experience has nonconceptual content.⁹ Presumably, part of the point of such references is to show that even a theorist who suggests that we are capable of genuinely singular, conceptual thought of individuals did not go so far as to suggest that the richly detailed attributive aspect of our thoughts or experiences could be both genuinely singular and conceptual.

To be sure, Gareth Evans suggested that nonconceptual content figures in explanations of persons rather than their subpersonal parts (whereas positing nonconceptual content in explanations of subpersonal processes can be common ground between conceptualists and nonconceptualists). But to assess what we should do with that suggestion today, we need to consider the broader project within which that suggestion figured.

Evans’s project was and still is ground-breaking in its overarching aim: to show that genuinely singular thought has Fregean senses or modes of presentation that identify individuals in the world and not merely some denizens of our own minds, such as the sense data to which Russell felt himself compelled to retreat. What Evans was trying to show in *The Varieties of Reference* is that the best in Frege, as it were, is consonant with the best in Russell. The leading insights of Frege and Russell – that senses or modes of presentation determine the individuation of mental contents, and that there are genuinely singular contents that involve what they represent – are not at odds but can be combined to yield the understanding that there is genuinely

⁹ Evans, G., 1982.

singular thought: thought that is conceptual, that is individuated by its discriminating understanding of individuals and that involves the represented worldly individuals.

This was Evans's radical project. If he could make it work, then it suggests the possibility that thought and experience can be genuinely singular – conceptual and world-involving – not only in their referential but also in their attributive capacities. His project suggests this possibility even if he himself did not explore it at the time he wrote *The Varieties of Reference*. But given his project, the possibility becomes available – even readily available. Finding the combination that unlocks Pandora's box frees all of its inhabitants and possibilities.

Here, in minimal outline before we pursue details, is the way in which Evans brings Russell's and Frege's insights together. Evans holds that Russell was correct that there are thoughts or contents that can only be thought if their referent exists. There are Russellian singular terms as well as thoughts: "whose sense depends upon their having a referent" (p.46). But Evans proposes that such thoughts have 'Fregean' senses, that is, that what determines the contents of Russellian singular thoughts is the subject's mode of identifying or individuating the referent. Evans believes that it is another Russellian thesis that directs us to ascribe 'Fregean' senses to singular thoughts. If we agree with Russell's principle that "a subject cannot make a judgment about something unless he knows which object his judgment is about" (p.89), then it will follow that a subject cannot think about a *particular* object without having the ability to identify that object. Russell's principle suggests that the capacity to think singular thoughts involves the capacity to identify the objects of those thoughts; it involves some form of individuating knowledge about those objects. The principle suggests, quite sensibly, no more than "that to entertain a thought, one must know what it would be for the thought to be true." (McDowell, 1990, p.256). In a nutshell, Evans' thesis is that the content of a particular thought is determined by the subject's mode of identifying the object, so that the possibility of the thought depends upon the success of that identification. In the case of demonstrative thoughts of particulars or individuals, Evans argues that it is our understanding of an individual's spatial location that allows us to identify it in a way that uniquely individuates it. The fundamental identification of individuals is a form of spatial thought and such thought, Evans argues, depends on the subject's capacity to be actively engaged with those objects.

This is one of Evans' principal contentions, one that is key for our purposes. Evans argues that our spatial thought is a form of understanding

rather than a reliable discriminatory capacity. He tries to show that spatial identification is a conceptual grasp of an object's location both in relation to oneself and in a more 'objective' or holistic mapping. Because the grasp has a necessarily egocentric component, Evans argues, it is object-involving content rather than the sort of self-standing content that does not involve the represented individual. Yet it requires conceptual understanding. This strand in Evans' work – the idea that our awareness of spatial particulars integrates two modes of identification, an egocentric and a holistic one – has figured in subsequent interest in the nature of spatial representation and spatial thought. Much empirical and philosophical work has come together on this topic.¹⁰ It would be fair to say that there is some agreement that spatial representation combines egocentric and holistic identifications of spatial particulars as Evans' suggested.

The significance for theories of perception is quite clear. It is not only individuals but also their properties that are spatially located. What if Evans is correct that our ability to discriminate or individuate spatial particulars (i) is a form of understanding for which a reliable causal process is necessary but not sufficient; (ii) that yields content that is "in part" egocentric, involving both the subject and the individual? If this line of thought is correct, then it might apply no less to the properties of individuals than to the individuals.

What is the difference between individuals and properties? Individual instances of properties are instances of kinds. This is to say that they are both determinate particulars and members of kinds. To experience a determinate instance of a property is to experience: a spatially located particular that belongs to a kind so that other individuals might have determinate instances of this kind. But Evans argues that singular thought of spatial individuals requires that we grasp both the unique individuality of that object, as it were, and its membership in a kind (at least the kind: object or individual that might have a variety of properties located at x). This will be clearer when I detail his account of conceptual capacities as essentially recombinatory along attributive and referential dimensions respectively – a capacity is conceptual insofar it allows a subject to attribute different properties to one object and to attribute the same property to different objects. If Evans is on the right track about the referentially and attributively recombinatory nature of conceptual capacities – which entails some grasp that individuals are potential bearers of different properties and that properties potentially characterize different individuals – and if he is on the right track about

¹⁰ For example, see *Spatial Representation*, edited by Eilan, N., McCarthy R., and Brewer, B., 1993.

the nature of spatial identification, he supplies a fruitful model for both the referential and attributive functions of perceptual content.¹¹

But is Evans' project on the right track? He faces an uphill struggle to convince us on both key points: (i) that spatial identification is a variety or form of understanding, and (ii) that spatial thought involves its objects. If he can marshal a convincing case for both, he explains that we are capable of genuinely singular thought of spatial particulars – and provides a model for perceptual engagement.

Despite its apparently uncontroversial nature, let's start from Evans' understanding of conceptual capacities in terms of their generality. Note that he does not claim to give an exhaustive account of what makes capacities conceptual.

In discussing the nature of our conceivings we have little enough to go on, but there is one fundamental constraint that must be observed in all our reflections: I shall call it 'The Generality Constraint.' (p.100)

Here is Evans' summary statement:

if a subject can be credited with the thought that a is F, then he must have the conceptual resources for entertaining the thought that a is G, for every property of being G of which he has a conception. This is the condition that I call "The Generality Constraint". (p. 104)

Though many theorists – including many who propose nonconceptual contents – endorse this constraint, it is not clear that they share the approach to concepts as *capacities* or *abilities* that this often-cited summary was intended to encapsulate.

Consider Evans' detailed development of this idea. Evans suggests that thought must be structured not in the sense that subjects use "symbols," or more generally that thoughts are "composed of *elements*," but in the sense that a thought is a "complex of abilities" (p. 101). Evans uses linguistic understanding as an analogy to show that insofar as a subject can understand the sentences 'Fa' and 'Gb' – or entertain the thoughts 'Fa' or 'Gb' – she can also understand the sentences 'Fb' and 'Ga,' and there is a common explanation of her understanding of 'Fa' and 'Ga' and of her understanding of 'Fb' and 'Gb'. Similarly, there is a "common partial explanation for a subject's having the thought that a is F and his having the thought that a is G:

¹¹ To avert misunderstanding here is an important qualification. To argue that Evans is on the right track is not to say that his work on singular thought of spatial particulars gives us all the resources we need to understand determinate instances of properties. What he provides is a model, a model that we need to elaborate, refine and bring together with a broad range of empirical research concerning the subpersonal processes that enable perceptual engagement. I will return to taking Evans' work as something like a model shortly.

there is a single state whose possession is a necessary condition for the occurrence of both thoughts” (p. 102). Moreover, “each of the abilities involved in the thought that *a* is *F*, though separable, can be exercised only in a (whole) thought – and hence always together with some other conceptual ability. This is the analogue of the fact that the understanding of a word is manifested only in the understanding of sentences, and hence always together with the understanding of other words” (p. 102).

The disanalogy between thoughts and sentences is that while sentences might be unstructured, thoughts are essentially structured. Evans suggests that we can imagine introducing a one-word sentence by stipulation to have a meaning that would normally be expressed by a structured sentence.¹² In contrast,

it simply is not a possibility for the thought that *a* is *F* to be unstructured – that is, not to be the exercise of two distinct abilities. It is a feature of the thought-content *that John is happy* that to grasp it requires distinguishable skills. In particular it requires possession of the concept of happiness – knowledge of what it is for a person to be happy; and that is something not tied to this or that particular person’s happiness. (pp.102-103)

[A]ny thought [...] having the content *that a is F* involves the exercise of an ability – knowledge of what it is for something to be *F* – which would be exercised in indefinitely many distinct thoughts, and would be exercised in, for instance, the thought that *b* is *F*. Similarly for the thought that *a* is *G*. And this of course implies the existence of a corresponding kind of ability, the ability to think of a particular object. For there must be a capacity which, when combined with a knowledge of what it is in general for an object to be *F*, yields the ability to entertain the thought that *a* is *F*, or at least a knowledge of what it is, or would be, for *a* to be *F*. ... (p.103)

We thus see the thought that *a* is *F* as lying at the intersection of two series of thoughts: on the one hand, the series of thoughts that *a* is *F*, that *b* is *F*, that *c* is *F*, [and so on], and, on the other hand, the series of thoughts that *a* is *F*, that *a* is *G*, and that *a* is *H*, [and so on]. (p.104, footnote 21)

But here is more:

Even readers not persuaded that *any* system of thought must conform to the Generality Constraint may be prepared to admit that the system of

¹² I think that Evans has in mind something along the lines of Wittgenstein’s point at the bottom of page 18e in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

“Can I say “bububu” and mean “If it does not rain I shall go for a walk?” – It is only in a language that I can mean something by something. This shews clearly that the grammar of “to mean” is not like that of the expression “to imagine” and the like.”

thought we possess – the system that underlies our use of language – does conform to it. (It is one of the fundamental differences between human thought and the information-processing that takes place in our brains that the Generality Constraint applies to the former but not the latter. When we attribute to the brain computations whereby it localizes the sounds we hear, we *ipso facto* ascribe to it representations of the speed of sound and of the distance between the ears, without any commitment to the idea that it should be able to represent the speed of light or the distance between anything else.) (p. 104, footnote 22)

In short, a capacity is conceptual if it is recombinatory along referential and attributive dimensions: if it involves grasping that a property of a certain object “is not tied to this or that” individual object, and that a particular object might have other properties as well as those being perceived or considered. (I shall drop the qualification “along referential and attributive dimensions respectively” from here, using the shorter phrase that our capacities are recombinatory to stand for Evans’ precise idea of the specific recombinatorial capacity at issue for conceptuality). Such re-combinatorial capacities distinguish human thought from the adaptive discriminatory capacities that enable the coupling of animals with their habitats. It is such recombinatorial capacities that constitute our grasp of objects as possessing various properties and of properties as the features of various objects.

Evans points out that with this account of the conceptual as a theoretical background or framework, Russell’s belief in the importance of individuating knowledge should not seem controversial. It is simply or “truistically enough” “the idea that, in order for a subject to be credited with the thought that *p*, he must know what it is for it be the case that *p*.” (p. 105) His point is that we can start from uncontroversial premises about concepts to reach conclusions that go against the flow of theories of reference. The premises’ good sense should give one pause – at the very least – when it comes to reacting against the conclusions.

Evans takes the Russellian idea – that to think about something requires knowing what you are thinking about – to argue for a fundamental “level” of thought – or better an aspect of thought or a capacity wherein we grasp a ground of difference that is “fundamental” in that it distinguishes a particular object of a certain kind from all others.

For any object whatever then, there is what may be called the *fundamental ground of difference* of that object (at a time). This will be a specific answer to the question ‘What differentiates that object from others?’ of the kind appropriate to objects of that sort. For example, the fundamental ground of difference of the number *three* is being the third number in the series of numbers; the fundamental ground of differ-

ence of the shape *square* is having four equal sides joined at right angles, and so on. (p. 107)

Evans believes that “we do very often employ such fundamental Ideas of objects in our thinking about them, but even when we do not, I want to suggest that such Ideas play a very central role in our thinking.” (pp. 107-8)

Together, the Generality Constraint and the innocuous thought that to think about a particular object one must be able to individuate an object, lead to the conclusion that demonstrative thoughts that depend on on-going informational contact with an object require understanding for which the informational contact is not sufficient. That is, when Evans turns to demonstrative thought of individuals with these commitments in place, he is in a position to show that an on-going causal link is necessary but not sufficient.

It is the spatiality of such objects that renders an informational-link insufficient. In and of itself, a camera-like connection with an object cannot supply the understanding of “what makes it the case that an object, distinguished as the occupant of a position in space, is that object.” (p. 149) An organism might be able “to respond differentially to those different values of the proximal stimulus which code the direction” of the input, without being able to represent the input spatially. The ability to respond differentially to spatial stimuli is not sufficient to attribute to the organism the ability to represent those stimuli as being located at different distal positions in space.

Rather, the subject needs to have some understanding of what makes it the case that the object she has in mind is a certain object out there at a unique position in space. What is at issue is a nexus of capacities to which activity is crucial. Self-initiated activity is important in that it allows a subject, take me for example, to integrate an egocentric mode of identifying the object – relative to myself, as it were on axes that radiate outwards from my potentialities for action – with an objective or holistic mapping that locates the object with respect to others. Such integration is possible insofar as I grasp myself as a physical object among others. But note that I do so through the mutually constitutive inter-dependence between an irreducibly egocentric mode of identification and an objective mode of identification. Evans argues that one can have an objective mode of identification only insofar as one has an egocentric one – and vice versa – one can only have an egocentric mode of identification insofar as one has an objective one. This is because it is spatial particulars that are being identified, oneself and other objects, and there is only one objective space, but we only grasp that space through our own activity. Moreover, generality concerning spatial particulars – about oneself as an object among others as well as about other individual objects – requires that one can integrate an egocentric mode of

thought with an objective one and the egocentric one can only arise from activity. This yields Evans' radical conclusion: that demonstrative thought of spatial particulars has objective reference and a partially egocentric sense. Thought of spatio-temporal particulars is genuinely singular in the sense that: (i) it requires an on-going informational link; (ii) has objective reference to objects in public space; (iii) an objective reference that is secured by a discriminating understanding that is partially egocentric.

If Evans' analysis is correct – and it is, at the very least, an insightful and theoretically suggestive analysis – it offers a way to understand that demonstrative spatial thought is a conceptual contentful capacity that involves its objects. This is what I characterized as Evans' radical, overarching aim and what I needed to extract from Evans' account so as to apply it to perceptual content. Two questions remain: why does Evans not extend this analysis of demonstrative thought to perception, and is there good reason to extend his approach nevertheless?

Why does Evans not extend this same sort of account to the content of perceptual experience? Despite his commitment to generality, Evans subscribes to something like 'order-effects' when it comes to conceptual capacities. One might discuss constitutive underlying commitments for this view. But in this paper, let's just consider what happens if we believe that conceptual capacities admit something like temporal, transformative 'order-effects' – and what happens if we do not. This is a divergence between Evans and a conceptualist like myself that does not undercut agreement over the radical aims of his project.

What do I mean by 'order-effects'? Very simply, this is the view that when conceptual capacities are involved perception, such capacities conceptual-ize – they conceptual-ize an aspect or ingredient of mental life that is not conceptual to yield perceptual judgment. This is precisely Evans' pre-supposition about perception.

The informational states which a subject acquires through perception are *non-conceptual*, or *non-conceptualized*. Judgments *based upon* such states necessarily involve conceptualization: in moving from a perceptual experience to a judgment about the world (usually expressible in some verbal form), one will be exercising basic conceptual skills. [...] The process of conceptualization or judgment takes the subject from his being in one kind of informational state (with a content of a certain kind, namely, non-conceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content). (p. 227)

Is there an alternative? How might conceptual capacities be in play if not in a way that allows for a transformative ordering – a before and after, that 'be-

fore and after' pictures display – such as Evans has in mind with the notion of '*conceptualization*'?

To discuss what is at issue in a short space, let's borrow an image from Sellars (though not the account wherein the image figures).¹³ What about the 'chess-entry' move that starts off a game of chess? Or the language-entry move that starts off a discussion, as when I might say "look, that poppy is blue!" Is there a transformative ordering, a 'before-and-after' in either case?

Sellars' image of an "entry" or an entry-move is useful because it pulls in both directions, presupposing the logic of 'before-and-after' pictures while pulling away from it as well. Sellars' image clearly invites discussion that presupposes that we are in a logical dimension where ordering is possible. After all, making an entrance presupposes a before and after – that is just what the idea of entering is all about, I enter from somewhere to somewhere else. The image of an entry is the image of a transition, of passing from one state to another as when we pass from one room to another, or from the outdoors into a familiar house. Evans is not alone in supposing that an entrance is made from the nonconceptual to the space of judgments. The image of a 'chess-entry move' invites precisely the view that Evans shares with many other theorists: an 'entry-move' 'takes' something that is not chess, applies the rules and voilà: 'it's a pawn moving to...' Similarly, when a subject sees that 'that poppy is blue,' the subject moves from a perceptual experience to a judgment, moving by means of a "process of conceptualization" from an informational state (with nonconceptual content) to a cognitive state (with conceptual content).

But do I chess-ualize when I begin a game? Does chess-ualization occur when the game begins? The idea of a 'game-entry' move – for beginning or initiating a game – pushes us away from the 'before-and after' image even while the seductive pull of that imagery is pre-supposed. Of course there is a transition – in some sense – from not playing chess to playing chess. But the issue is, in starting the game, do rules begin to apply that did not apply before, taking the board (like Evans' subject) from being in one kind of state – one where the rules of chess do not yet apply – to another kind of state – where the rules do apply?

It is not that the rules of chess do not apply and then begin to apply. Rather, they always apply so long as one has the requisite abilities. Sometimes we initiate a game using the rules. More often than not when it

¹³ Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language Games," 1963. In this paper, Sellars develops his own very precise proposal about rule-following in general and language in particular – using notions such as language entry transitions and language departure transitions – which he refers back to Wittgenstein's locus classicus in his title; though when he does refer to another philosopher's work on rule-following within the paper, it is rather to Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind*.

comes to chess we do not – we play games of chess only intermittently, after all. But when we initiate a game we do not ‘transform’ what is not yet a chess board with chess pieces. When I start to play a game, I do so insofar as I grasp the rules and it is the fact that I grasp the rules that makes my movement a move in the game – perhaps the first move, which is our focus here. It is the background of capacities that I have – which are in no sense all being deployed – which make a certain motion a chess move. How are those capacities relevant? To start a game is to activate or bring a certain region of rules ‘into play’, pardon the pun. Why the metaphor? We need to talk of potentialities with the caveat that there are many unwanted resonating echoes in this domain (one might think of dispositions, for just one example). But this is the region of logical space we need to explore to hit on just the right explanation, a region that is different from the region of ‘before and after’ pictures that involve transitions in the sense of transformations.

Just as the image of a *transformation* is not apt for what occurs when one begins a game of chess, so the image is not apt for what occurs as one makes a ‘perceptual judgment’ – or preferably, what occurs as one sees that a poppy is, very surprisingly, blue. We need to work on good ways to make this point. One way to make it might use Evans’ idea of the Generality Constraint. Does this come as a surprise? Suppose I point out a blue poppy to you saying, “That poppy is blue!” What makes this a meaningful utterance? It is meaningful insofar as I could say more of the same – more relevant claims that recombine along referential and attributive dimensions respectively as Evans suggested. One might add that my exclamation is meaningful insofar as other statements (or exclamations, questions, requests, etc.) are standing ready to be spoken if it became reasonable or rationally appropriate to do so. Though this last qualification about appropriateness adds imagery to Evans’ Generality Constraint, it comes to the same. Recall that according to Evans, a meaningful sentence *lies* “at the intersection of two series of thoughts.” The intersection is not between actual series, but between potential series – series that a subject could entertain or has the capacity to entertain. A sentence lies at such an intersection insofar as the subject has more of the same to say and to think – along the referential and attributive dimensions. And a subject *would* say or think more if it became appropriate to do so or if she chose to go on to do so. To return to our example, what is standing in readiness is more of the same – the capacity to think or to say “That poppy is true blue! How rare! Just like the blue of my *delphinium*.” or “That poppy is *exquisite*.” or perhaps “Are you sure that is true blue, it is very shady here.”

Note that if it is the fact that there is more of the same that I could say that makes what I do say meaningful, this holds whether what I say is an opening gambit or not. The same holds for chess. It is the fact that I can make more appropriate (and related) moves that makes my opening gambit a move that starts a game of chess. It is not that I take what is not yet a chess-board and render it one with my opening gambit. I do not chess-ualize.

This core conceptualist commitment does not deny that perception is special. What it denies is that what makes perception special is captured with the image of an entry or a transition that takes us from one kind of state to a very different one, as when one enters from the outdoors into the familiar space of one's house. What makes perception special is to be found not in further refinements – or epicycles – of this old imagery and its attendant logic. What makes perception special is that it is a mode of engagement with individuals and their determinate properties.

And Evans is one theorist who gives us resources for understanding the engagement that is special to perception, without any need to slip back into the old imagery of transformations and 'before-and-after' pictures. Why not take his radical insights as far as they will go? If there is a good respect of analogy between the first move in a game of chess and a demonstrative utterance that opens a conversation about what we both see, the further analogy to perceptual experiences is straightforward and should come as no surprise. When I see *that blue poppy*, it is not the case that I conceptualize what is not already a blue poppy in my experience. The logic of 'before-and-after pictures' does not apply. (Though note that if one identifies (i) the external facts that figure in explanations of persons, with (ii) the external facts that figure in explanations of their subpersonal processes – so that the external contextual facts that figure in explanations of persons are the same as the external facts that figure in explanations of our subpersonal processes – then the logic of transformations, of 'before-and-after pictures' is compulsory.¹⁴)

It would be a welcome bonus if someone whose commitments do not already predispose them towards this view might find this sketch convincing. But that was not the task set for this discussion. The task was to identify a divergence in understanding of conceptual capacities between Evans and a contemporary conceptualist, a divergence that does not undercut agreement over the radical aims of Evans work. The difference I have identified is the divergence (whose motivations run as deep as any) that makes Evans stop his account at judgments and that makes the conceptualist extend Evans' account to perceptual experiences. It is the difference that allows a

¹⁴ My "Perceptual Engagement with the World" develops an extended argument for this point.

conceptualist to share in Evans' project while making one key departure: changing Evans' account of perceptual experience from an informational state with nonconceptual content to an account of perceptual experience as engagement that has conceptual object- and property-involving content. Denying that the conceptual admits a 'before and after' picture allows one to take Evans' radical project about demonstrative thought and turn it towards perception as well.

To be more precise, what a conceptualist can do is to take the explanatory resources from Evans' account of the content of demonstrative spatial thought of individuals and use them for explaining perceptual content. Or perhaps, somewhat more strongly, a conceptualist can consider the main explanatory moves in Evans' account of demonstratives as a fruitful model for explaining the content of perceptual engagement.

It is important to be clear about this since it preempts the following sort of objection. The charge can and has been laid that a conceptualist like McDowell overlooks that experience cannot be constituted by demonstrative concepts because demonstrative content is itself anchored by experience.¹⁵ Let's take both aspects of this charge in turn: first, the presupposition that demonstrative content is "anchored" by experience; second, the charge that conceptualism holds that experience is "constituted" by demonstrative concepts.

That experience "anchors" demonstrative concepts is one of the dividing issues between nonconceptualism and conceptualism and so it cannot be presupposed as an objection to conceptualism. Conceptualism takes a holistic approach to beliefs and perceptions. Highlighting the holistic relations among what I see and what I say – and what I think – stresses the mutual inter-dependence among our capacities rather than a uni-directional flow from perception 'inwards.' To the extent that conceptualism includes epistemic and semantic holism, it offers an alternative package to the commitments that the objection voices. Demonstrative concepts are just one among a whole host of our capacities that need to be available in potentiality, that

¹⁵ See "Conceptualist Views of Content" (§6.1) in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for the summary statement of this charge, and Heck, Jr. (2000) for an elaborate development of it. Aside from the charge that conceptualism cannot have it both ways, as it were – that demonstrative concepts cannot both constitute experience and be anchored by experience – there seems to be widespread belief in at least one half of this conjunction: namely, that conceptualism proposes that concepts constitute perceptual experience. Here is a representative quotation from Kelly that opens his "Demonstrative Concepts and Experience" (2001). "Their [the conceptualists] claim, more precisely, is that every perceptual experience is such that, of necessity, its content is constituted entirely by concepts possessed by the subject having the experience." (pp. 397-8).

might be standing ready or perhaps even activated as we perceive. To be sure, I can only say “Look at that blue” if both you and I are looking at the same poppy. But this does not require an explanation that posits that our shared understanding of the demonstrative ‘that blue’ is *based on or anchored by* our perceptions. Rather, our perceptions have a special role (epistemic in part, if you will) insofar as they engage us with our surroundings – but they can only be perceptions of objects and properties to the extent that they involve individuating understanding of properties and objects. Though he allowed his holistic account to stray into coherentism, Sellars had a wonderful way of putting this point:

The metaphor of “foundation” is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.

Above all, the picture is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it all begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once. (Sellars, 1997, pp.78-79.)

Secondly, nothing in my account suggests that demonstrative concepts “constitute” perceptual experience. Indeed, my aim is to make clear the conceptualist alternative. That is part of the point of presenting Evans’ approach in detail. Recall that Evans’ suggests that concepts are capacities and that singular thought is a “complex” of capacities. Such capacities are conceptual insofar as they satisfy certain fairly exacting requirements. To suggest all this is to propose that singular thought is conceptual insofar as it is a “complex” of capacities that satisfies the specified requirements. A range of capacities is both activated and standing in the wings as I see with marvel what I could express by saying “that poppy is true blue!” It is crucial to such capacities that they allow recombination along both the referential and attributive dimensions respectively – so that while I am looking at the poppy, I might also recall the red and yellow and orange *poppies* I have seen, or wonder whether *this blue* is really as true as the blue of my delphinium. But it is important not to confuse the two conceptualist claims that (i) I can only express what I see by using demonstrative concepts like “that blue,” and that (ii) such demonstrative contents can be used as models for explaining perceptual content; with the altogether different claim that demonstrative concepts *constitute* perceptual contents. It is not conceptualism that suggests that concepts literally constitute perceptual contents (whatever

that might be). Explanations of linguistic content can stand as models for accounts of other kinds of mental contents without any implication that linguistic contents constitute those kinds of contents. There is good reason why we have detailed analyses of different kinds of linguistic contents. Language is a good – readily and publicly available – place to start. But once we have such analyses, we can help ourselves to the theoretical resources they offer in understanding contents that might seem a little more elusive – like the contents of our thoughts, wishes, fears and perceptions. To use an explanatory model is not to constitute what one is explaining out of the model.

In short, a conceptualist approach like mine offers an alternative to the view that demonstrative content is “anchored by” experience; and in no sense implies that experience is “constituted” by demonstrative concepts. If I want to express what I see, I need to use demonstrative concepts such as “that blue.” This is not to claim that demonstrative concepts “constitute” perceptual experience.

To conclude, here at last is the view of perception that Evans makes available. Like demonstrative thought, perceptual experience has ‘sense’ and ‘reference’: an objective reference and a sense that is egocentric in part. To say this is to identify a kind of conceptual content or a range of conceptual capacities. These capacities come together in our perceptual experience of spatial objects – or as I would prefer to say, in our perceptual engagement with spatial objects. When one perceives an object, one has individuating understanding of the object’s location in space, both relative to one’s own capacities for action and in relation to other objects. Active engagement with objects yields such understanding because one’s awareness of oneself as an individual in space among others and one’s perception of other individuals entail one another.

Now it is my turn to ask: why would not all this be true of our perception of the properties of these objects and not just of the objects themselves?

Objects and properties do not come apart. Properties are spatial particulars – that belong to kinds that are not tied to this or that object – whereas objects are spatial particulars that have a range of various properties. This is the difference between properties and objects captured in Evans’ Generality Constraint. But it is not a difference that renders Evans’ account of spatial thought of objects inapplicable to determinate, spatially located properties. I will elaborate shortly.

But first it is important to emphasize that my point throughout this section is *not* to suggest that *all* we need for explaining perception is to be

found in Evans' *Varieties of Reference*. The point is to show that Evans opens up a fruitful avenue for further research. The point is to show that there is something quite precise and explanatorily adequate at work in the conceptualist likening of perceptual content and demonstrative content. Consider the conceptualist suggestion that perceptual content is like demonstrative thought in both its referential and attributive functions, so that we can explain the conceptual yet determinate nature of a perceptual experience much like we would explain the demonstrative content "that is true blue." What such a conceptualist can have in mind – at the very least – is an account of spatial thought along the lines Evans makes available.

Suppose we do want to continue with Evans' approach a little further – in the clear understanding that conceptualists are not restricted only to Evans' account and invite others to join them in moving forward from this model. Since Evans focuses on the sort of understanding requisite for identifying an object, to extend his account to perception of properties, we need to modify his account of the understanding that a perceiver needs to have. A perceiver needs to have some understanding of what makes it the case that the property she perceives is a certain determinate instance out there at a unique position in space. (i) She needs to understand what it is for something to be *x*, happy or blue, for example. That is, she needs some understanding of the property at issue. (ii) She needs to be able to identify the instance spatially. Her capacity to identify the instance spatially must be recombinatory – it must involve grasping that the property "is not tied to this or that" individual. That is, she must in some sense grasp that there are other instances in order to grasp at all that what she sees is a property – just as, according to Evans, she must grasp that the object she sees might have other properties in order to grasp at all that it is an object she sees.

Consider my perceptual experience of a blue poppy. If I have some understanding of color, and if I can identify that blue of the poppy spatially, then I have a perceptual grasp of that determinate instance that distinguishes it from all others. Moreover, if Evans' account of spatial identification is on track, my perceptual experience – which I could express by saying "that blue" – would have an objective reference with a partly egocentric sense.

Objects and properties do not come apart. This may seem a trivial point but are we sure we recognize it in all its forms and implications? Evans' account of the recombinatory nature of conceptual capacities makes this point. A recombinatory grasp of an object entails that the object might have a range of properties – it might have properties in addition to those currently perceivable. To identify myself as a spatial individual among others is to identify myself as having a range of properties. The same holds for other spatio-temporal objects I identify. Evans is pointing out a complex of capacities that must involve identification of properties *insofar as it is identi-*

fication of objects. Objects and properties do not come apart in our identifications of objects and of ourselves – *or it wouldn't be objects that we identify, ourselves among others, in a mutually constitutive package.* The mutually constitutive package that Evans explores, calling it identification of spatio-temporal objects, includes properties. There is no such package without them. Perhaps this entailment has been overlooked.

What distinguishes perception of properties from perception of objects, on Evans' outlook, is that perceiving a property includes grasping that other instances might be tied to other objects, whereas perceiving an object includes grasping that this particular might have other properties. This is the repeatability of properties. It shows up in the recent dictum among theorists of mind that insofar as I can identify a property, I can also re-identify it. More precisely, grasping repeatability requires being able to identify the same determinate property if it recurs or recognizing similar instances. Does perceptual engagement satisfy this condition? That is, does my account of perception as perceptual engagement have the resources to satisfy this requirement? When we focus on repeatability and hence the potential for re-identification, we come across a problem for understanding perception that is not just posed by one's outlook so that on a different outlook it does not seem problematic at all.¹⁶ It is a challenge for all concerned.

4 Engagement and Re-Identification: What Makes Perceptual Engagement Conceptual if Not Persistence?

A genuine problem that requires that we all – conceptualists and nonconceptualists alike – fine-tune our understanding of conceptual capacities is the so-called re-identification problem. The problem is that it is possible to raise cases where it seems that a subject can identify something that she is later unable to re-identify. The cases are of two sorts. First, there are cases where a subject can make certain pair-wise discriminations – and in that sense, identify each member – yet fail to re-identify either member taken singly. Secondly, there are cases where a subject will fail to re-identify one item across many trials on a better than chance basis. These sorts of cases are taken to show that our discriminatory capacity outruns our capacity to re-identify. Insofar as it is a hallmark of conceptual capacities that conceptual identification entails re-identification, such cases are taken to show that

¹⁶ Yes, I am suggesting that many of the problem cases raised by nonconceptualists -- such as illusions, belief encapsulation and geometrical shapes like diamonds – can be explained quite readily from a conceptualist perspective. I regret that space does not permit offering a conceptualist account of each of these sorts of cases here.

we can perceive more than we can identify conceptually (in a way that supports re-identification). Some of our perception at least, it is claimed, is a nonconceptual discriminatory capacity that “outruns” our conceptual capacities.

What is at issue is a coupling of the idea of conceptual thought and the capacity for re-identification. There might be different motivations for believing that conceptual thought involves the capacity to identify its objects or properties and that this must involve the capacity to re-identify those objects or properties. But there seems to be agreement on the condition itself. Here are Diana Raffman’s unequivocal statements from her influential paper, “On the Persistence of Phenomenology”: “if we can identify something whenever we encounter it, then *ipso facto* we can re-identify it” (p. 301), “you can recognize only what you can remember” (p.295). To some, these points seem almost truistic. They are, in any case, common ground between conceptualists and many nonconceptualists.

The same thought is at the heart of Wittgenstein’s investigations of the possibility of keeping a private diary. After all, keeping a diary or keeping track of something is identifying it and re-identifying it. Since this a locus classicus for the re-identification condition, let’s consider it briefly. Wittgenstein’s discussion highlights that there are circumstances in which I cannot make the distinction between it seeming to me that I am keeping track correctly and keeping track correctly: “whatever is going to seem right to me is right.” If I cannot make this distinction, “that only means that here we cannot talk about ‘right’.” (1953, §258) The core idea is that in order to identify something, I must be able to make the distinction that the private diarist cannot. I fail insofar as “whatever is going to seem right to me [or to the diarist] is right.” (§258) This insight has quite a few consequences. For example, it leads us to consider other kinds of circumstances and cases where someone might not be in a position to make the distinction between it seeming to her that she is identifying correctly and identifying correctly.

One such case that Wittgenstein raises is thought or identification involving a sample. Here one might ask, is sheer possession of the sample – isolating possession from any other factors that might be relevant, such as context, etc. – sufficient for identifying (and hence re-identifying) the sample? The private diarist case indicates one condition that we need to consider. Does sheer possession of a sample *allow one to make the distinction that the private diarist cannot*? Let’s say I have a certain sample today and then I have the same sample again tomorrow. Is that sufficient for me to have resources for making a distinction between it seeming to me that I am keeping track correctly and keeping track correctly? No, whatever is going to seem right to me is right. In considering the private diarist, Wittgenstein suggests that the problem is that the diarist lacks independent criteria of

correctness (to which she is responsive). This lack also characterizes cases of sheer possession of a sample.

Wittgenstein's interweaving discussions of different kinds of thoughts alerts us to the fact that different kinds of thoughts involve identification – for example, thoughts that involve a sample as well as thoughts that do not – so that we need to be alert to differences in the way various kinds of thoughts or identifications might satisfy the need for independent criteria of identity. His investigations also lead us to consider how the world might help us out, different aspects of the world helping out more or less in different sorts of cases to provide independent criteria of correctness to which we can be responsive.

Demonstrative thought and – if I am on the right track, perceptual engagement – are examples of kinds of thoughts that involve samples. If sheer possession of a sample will not suffice for re-identification, what more is required?

When we turn to contemporary debates about demonstrative concepts, perception, and re-identification, we find imagery of distance and persistence. The first image suggests that conceptual thought is characterized by a necessary distance between us and what we identify. This was Evans' idea as well: the recombinatory nature of conceptual capacities allows for an alternative to the sort of tight coupling between complex animals and habitats. We might image this as a distancing that gives us some independence from our environments, allowing our thoughts to range over more than is present to us. Wittgenstein's *locus classicus* concerning the relationship between identification and re-identification adds another way to think about what is at issue in the distance metaphor. What some measure of 'distance' (or uncoupling) secures against is that "whatever will seem to me to be right, will be right." Distance is required in the sense that it allows for a distinction between it seeming to me that I am identifying correctly and identifying correctly.

Imagery of persistence seems to be making the same suggestion as well. Being able to keep a sample in mind so that it persists when it is not present also 'de-couples' our thoughts from their context, extending their range, thereby freeing us from our contexts and empowering us, in contrast to the coupling of animals and their contexts.

But it should be clear that my approach goes against the persistence imagery. Approaching perception as perceptual engagement entails that perceptual content does not persist. If perceptual richness is correctly understood as engagement with determinate properties and individuals (under perceptual modes of presentation, of course), then such perceptual content does not persist. I have argued that we do not *retain* determinate detail. I have also

argued that there is good reason for this phenomenological datum. Insofar as perception is perceptual engagement, when we are no longer engaged with a determinate instance of a property, we cannot represent it with matching determinacy because the determinacy is the determinacy of the sample – under our perceptual modes of presentation to be sure.

Noting that perceptual engagement fails the ‘persistence condition’ seems to make our question more pressing: if perception is perceptual engagement, does it satisfy the conditions for conceptual thought and what sort of re-identification does it allow? This is the question that came up at the end of examining Evans’ work, now filled-out by considerations from a different avenue of argumentation. I suggest that the problem cases raised by nonconceptualists lead us towards the answer, though not the nonconceptualist answer.

Nonconceptualists ask us to examine situations where we can make a pairwise discrimination but where we cannot reliably or consistently re-identify either of the stimuli taken singly. The cases can be actual empirical experiments or thought experiments. The experimental scenarios might concern perceptual stimuli such as color patches that we can barely discriminate or perhaps actual individual objects or items like paint chips. Let’s start with the richer case where items or objects are at issue. Sean Dorrance Kelly asks us to imagine a subject distinguishing between a square and a triangle consistently. We are to imagine that the same subject is subsequently shown the same triangle ten times. The result of this thought experiment is that there is no reason to suppose that the subject could identify what he is shown as the same triangle better than chance – more than five times out of ten. Alternatively, we are to imagine a subject who can discriminate between two colour samples of very similar colors (shades of green). When the subject is presented ten times with one of those color chips “It is perfectly conceivable that the subject might not be able to re-identify this shade consistently.” “It’s perfectly conceivable, in other words, and there’s nothing about the nature of *perception* to keep it from being true, that our capacity to discriminate colors exceeds our capacity to re-identify the colors discriminated” (Kelly, 2001, p. 411).

I do not contest that I can imagine what I am being asked to imagine. Rather, the problem is that I can imagine too much else along these lines. And this helps us identify what is amiss. These sorts of cases generalize in a way that extends the nonconceptualist conclusion to absurdity, making us think about what is going wrong in such cases.

A year ago I was so struck by the beauty of a square pottery plate that I succumbed to the temptation to buy an extra one for myself, in addition to buying a barely discriminable one as a wedding present. The square of pottery is glazed in a deep yet vivid shade of red with a single curving blaze of

mid blue off to one side. I could barely discriminate among the stack of such platters, but enough at any rate to pick one for myself and one for my friend – with the help of the patient shop owner who obligingly held up pairs for me to choose between. Since that day this square field of vibrant red with a blue slash sits on a bookcase in my dining room and I walk past it several times every day. We are in the domain of a thousand or more such encounters by now. There is no doubt that I re-identify the platter correctly several times a day. Yet I can also imagine that I would fail the re-identification test as it is presented in discussions such as the one I cited above. Actually, I am quite sure that I would fail. Present me ten (or more times) with the same platter and only that platter outside of any context and I would not re-identify it better than chance. I couldn't be sure whether I was seeing the same platter and I would take one stab after another at identifying it.

Once these sorts of discrimination cases set me thinking about my square of red pottery, I couldn't help but think about the intricately patterned multi-color Persian carpet in my living room next door. While the pottery square is stunning in its simplicity, the adjacent carpet is striking in its intricacy. Spanning ten years, my encounters with the carpet are well into many thousands. Yet if I was presented with it, just by itself over and over again, could I consistently re-identify it? I do not think so. And this holds true for all the individual objects in my house.

What is going wrong here? Do these cases suggest that *all* perceptual content – of all individuals as well as properties – is nonconceptual in the sense that it fails the “re-identification condition”? Some might hold this position, but most nonconceptual content theorists would not for very good reasons (that one might mischievously dub epistemic). If it does not make good theoretical sense to suggest that all perceptual identification of objects is nonconceptual and fails the re-identification condition, what has gone wrong? And what can we learn from it?

When I consider any individual object with which I am intimately acquainted, I find that I could not consistently re-identify it in the sort of scenario that the discrimination trials use. The reason is that in the imagined kind of scenario, it is not possible for me to make a distinction between it seeming to me that I am identifying (or re-identifying) the platter correctly and re-identifying it correctly. I cannot make that distinction all by myself in a completely decontextualized scenario.

What the discrimination thought experiments and actual experiments show, in part, is that identification is not a decontextualized isolatable capacity. That is not how identification works. Should this come as a surprise? What if we think about Evans' work on the capacities involved in the

identification of spatial particulars? What he points to is a “complex” of capacities that includes an understanding of the sort of object at issue, which is, at the very least an understanding of it as an occupant (that might have a variety of properties) in space in relation both to myself and to other objects. I can identify my red platter consistently because walking through my dining room I have access to a lot of facts about it that help me out – such as that we are both in my dining room. If you decontextualize both me and the object, so that I have no understanding I can draw on to help identify the object, then even if it is a beloved object with which I have often been engaged, there is no reason to suppose that I can identify it better than chance. What, in such a condition, can allow me to answer the following question: Is this the platter I was just shown or another one barely distinguishable from it? There is no answer I can give to this question. But if you put the platter on my bookshelf, the worldly facts with which I engage can help me out. That is, I can use them to help myself given all the understanding that I can marshal.

I am suggesting that the discrimination scenarios would apply to all the ordinary spatio-temporal individual objects with which we engage perceptually – except the faces of human beings. There is much that we do not understand yet about facial recognition, but one of the facts that we know and that make it striking is that facial recognition survives decontextualized discrimination tests. We can recognize human faces out of context – that is, we can recognize them in very different and novel contexts where the sort of contextual understanding that we have is just as inapplicable or unhelpful as the no-context conditions that characterize discrimination trials. Faces are a fascinating limiting or exceptional case to identification of spatial particulars.

If this line of reasoning is correct, it indicates that discrimination trials do teach us something, but not what the nonconceptualist suggests. Such cases do not teach us that some identification, specifically identification of certain properties, is nonconceptual. This is because the cases extend far beyond the sorts of contents at which a nonconceptualist is aiming. Since such cases extend to all identification of spatial individuals – except human faces – this would render all perceptual identification nonconceptual. Rather these cases indicate just how rich conceptual identification is. Take away the context and the understanding that is integral to identification of spatio-temporal particulars, identification fails.

Since I am using my own experiences throughout this paper – contrary to the nonconceptualist charge that conceptualists are not motivated by the nature of perceptual experience and that “there does not seem to be any obvious phenomenological reason to hold such a [conceptualist] view,” (Kelly,

2001, p.401)¹⁷ – let me continue in what is not mere indulgence, to indicate how my exercises in phenomenology come together with my broader philosophical training. Once I started examining my own perceptual experiences of individual objects and their properties in light of the discrimination trials, I couldn't help but think of Wittgenstein's private diarist passage. The two scenarios – bare discrimination tests and private diary keeping – have something in common, after all. To be sure, a private diarist and a subject in a discrimination trial differ in that the former is trying to keep track of one of his own mental episodes whereas the latter is trying to keep track of a spatial object. Yet, the scenarios are similar in that they are both completely de-contextualized. Neither the diarist nor the discriminating subject has a context for their exercise, a context on which they might draw. The private diarist has no help from the world and neither does the discriminating subject (and the world includes persons, constitutively members of communities, but there is no need in this paper to belabor what the world is). Let me repeat – the private diarist has no help from the world and neither does the subject in discrimination trials. I am tempted to say that this similarity is important. Without intending to do so, framers of such experiments (whether they be real experiments or thought experiments) reduce the conditions of normal perception to a decontextualized setting where it should not be surprising that a subject cannot make a distinction between it seeming to her that she is keeping track and keeping track. Where a subject lacks the resources for making this distinction, we have no reason to imagine performance that is better than chance. Where performance is not better than chance, we cannot attribute understanding. On this last claim we all agree. Perhaps these sorts of trials should make us recall not only Wittgenstein but also J.J. Gibson (with whose work Evans was impressed and

¹⁷ Kelly goes on to assert that philosophers motivated by phenomenology are “typically” nonconceptualists and that conceptualists are not motivated by phenomenology. I mention this since it is not an a-typical attitude. It strikes me as a less than un-prejudicial characterization of the positions. “Indeed, those philosophers motivated by the phenomenology of perception clearly reject the idea [“that perceptual content is characterized by something conceptual”]. They typically think that the content of experience is in some way richer, more complicated, or more fine-grained than the content of thought, and therefore that perception ought not to be characterized in terms of the elements of thought at all. McDowell and Brewer are not motivated by the phenomenology of perception. Rather, they are motivated by a certain kind of *epistemological* concern.” (pp.401-402)

Lest it seem that I am picking on Kelly's paper in particular, allow me to clarify that my quotations are also a compliment to the clarity of that paper.

whose notion of information he was using).¹⁸ Recall Gibson's point that if we strap a subject into a chair, immobilizing all but her eyes, we cannot expect to learn much about perception. Similarly, if we decontextualize what the subject perceives, we cannot expect identification and we cannot expect to learn much about lived, real world perception.

So far, I have argued that 'sheer possession' of a sample (for example, in conditions that neutralize understanding, do not allow for independent criteria of correctness, etc.) is not sufficient for understanding. What more does perception require? I have suggested that one way to think about this is to ask: what more is needed to enable a person to make a distinction between it seeming to her that she is identifying correctly and identifying correctly? This is the sort of 'distance' from one's reactions or discriminations (however reliable they might be) that is needed for consistent identification that we would call conceptual. A detailed examination lies beyond the scope of this paper. But it is important to note that such a detailed examination would help elaborate our understanding of the capacities we call conceptual – capacities that are recombinatory along referential and predicative dimensions, that allow for re-identification, that require more than "whatever is going to seem right to me is right." In this paper, I have been focusing on the importance of one's spatio-temporal context (in the sense appropriate for persons, namely the world). I am suggesting that when it comes to perceptual engagement with spatio-temporal particulars (individuals and their determinate properties), the spatio-temporal context and our understanding of it supplies what we need.

Recall my suggestion that my capacity to re-identify my red pottery square makes use of the fact that we are both in my dining room. Evans' work can help us understand this. Evans insists that spatial identification involves the integration of egocentric and holistic mappings. The holistic mapping locates the red pottery square vis-à-vis other objects in my dining room (and locates my dining room vis-à-vis other rooms in my house, my house vis-à-vis others on my street, my street vis-à-vis others in Toronto, Toronto vis-à-vis other cities in Ontario, and so on.)

What if I visit my friend in Connecticut, and find myself struck by a red pottery square in her home? My understanding that I am on a farm in Connecticut would enable me to identify that pottery plate as not mine but the one I gave to her. Alternatively, I can also imagine failing to identify correctly – but only momentarily. Walking into her house I might be surprised to see my plate on her shelf – but I would immediately correct myself.

¹⁸ Evans begins his section, "The Informational System" by giving a Gibsonian characterization of the notion of information that refers the reader to Gibson's *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1968).

Standing in her living room, after flying into LaGuardia and driving to her farm, I could make the distinction between it seeming to me that I am identifying my red plate and identifying my red plate. I would realize immediately that this is her plate and not mine.

This is the sort of competent perceptual re-identification of individuals and properties that we can expect. The question was: if perception is engagement as I have tried to suggest, can it satisfy the conditions on conceptual thought? Can it satisfy re-identification – imagined not in a decontextualized setting but in the sort of real-world settings that do not neutralize all understanding? Yes, it can.

What perceptual engagement does not do is to allow ‘persistence’ in the sense that I can continue to enjoy content of the same determinacy once I am no longer engaged with the individual or property. But the fact that it does not allow for the imagery of persistence does not render it non conceptual. Not all conceptual contents are the same. That is part of the point of detailing interesting varieties of conceptual contents. Perceptual contents satisfy the hallmark conditions on conceptual contents. They do not satisfy the idea that conceptual contents persist. They had better not or we would be disengaged from the world.

Our sense of just how wonderful perception is and our concern to understand our place in the world – our theory of mind, of world, of language and our epistemic concerns – can come together seamlessly when we allow ourselves to notice that we are perceptually engaged with the world.

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Sonia Sedivy
University of Toronto
Department of Philosophy
Northrop Frye 218
Toronto ON, Canada, M5S1A2
sonia.sedivy@utoronto.ca