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## Sellars and Conceptualism

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### Introduction

It is well-known that Sellars argues that thought and sensation are different in kind from each other in that the former has intentionality, while the latter does not. However, it might not be so familiar that he struggles to characterize perceptual experience as a mental state in which thought and sensation are unified in a unique way. Here is a passage from Sellars (1975) that reflects this fact remarkably:

Visual perception itself is not just a conceptualizing of colored objects within visual range—a ‘thinking about’ colored objects in a certain context—but, in a sense most difficult to analyze, a *thinking in color* about colored objects (p. 305).

According to Sellars, perceptual experience includes a conceptual thought whose content is propositional, in virtue of our having acquired a battery of conceptual capacities, which begins with our initiation into language; on the other hand, an experience is not only a thinking, say, that something is a red triangle, but a seeing that it is so, because it includes a visual sensation of a red triangle. But he never feels that this duality of experience can be construed as a mere juxtaposition of sensation and thought,

or as a merely causal relationship between the two. We can recognize this rationale in the fact that he chooses the impressive but unusual expression “thinking in color”, in order to describe the unique unity of the two elements that make up an experience.

However, is his “hybrid” conception of experience, which assumes that its two elements are intelligible independently of each other, suitable for such a unity—if any? Rather, is it not more suitable to conceive the two aspects of experience as “even notionally inseparable”<sup>1</sup>?

This conception is called “conceptualism” in the contemporary philosophy of perception. My aim in this paper is to propose a new conceptualism that is inspired by the very idea of visual experience as an act of thinking in color. First, I consider the standard notion of conceptualism, which holds that the conceptual content of experience is propositional, and argue that there is a tension between conceptualism and the kind of naïve realism that it craves. Second, I point out that given this tension, conceptualism should be regarded as motivated without immediately leading to the propositionalist version. Third, I consider a conceptualism according to which the conceptual content of experience is not propositional but specified by a demonstrative phrase, and argue that the position is also in variance with the naïve realism. Finally, I suggest that the very idea of thinking in color gestures toward a form of conceptualism that is compatible with it.

## 1. Propositionalist Conceptualism

The position known as standard conceptualism was originally proposed in McDowell (1996). We can call it propositionalist conceptualism, since it credits perceptual experience with conceptual content that is propositional. The argument for propositionalist conceptualism goes as follows:

- Perceptual experience can justify belief (an innocuous common sense which the Myth of the Given rightly respects).
- If perceptual experience can justify belief, the former has proposi-

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<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from J. McDowell. For the original usage, see McDowell (1996), p. 41.

tional conceptual content (for, as Coherentism rightly points out, only what has propositional content can justify belief, whose content is propositional).

- Therefore, perceptual experience has propositional conceptual content.
- A true propositional content is a fact (the truth-identity theory as a “truism”).
- Hence, the content of a veridical perceptual experience is a fact.

It appears that this argument forces conceptualism to accept that facts are perceptible entities. Moreover, according to the identity theory above, facts are true propositions. Therefore, perceptible facts are abstract since propositions are clearly so. However, if we respect a common sense about perception, we have to think that perceptible entities are something concrete, such as particular material objects, events, and states. Then how can perceptions of facts relate to perceptions of concrete particulars? At least McDowell (1996) focuses exclusively on the ontological category of fact, so that it tends to miss perceptions of concrete particulars. Nevertheless, we might manage to make room for the same within the framework of propositionalist conceptualism by equating such perceptions with perceptions of facts<sup>2</sup>.

However would doing so amount to genuinely appreciating the particularity and concreteness of perceptual content? Here, one could consider McDowell’s familiar idea of experience as openness to the world. As evinced by his own claim that “[t]he image of openness is appropriate for experience in particular,” McDowell did not think that it was possible for us to construe the mode of our experiential direct contact with reality exclusively in terms of the truth-identity theory. Experience is distinguished from thought such as belief, because the former is sensory consciousness. The peculiar immediacy of experience denotes that to experience things is for them to be presented to the subject in sensory consciousness. If we open our eyes, we will have in view certain concrete things, such as a desk and a dog. Of course, then their properties, such as colors and shape, will be also manifest to us. But these are not universals but concrete particulars that are instantiated

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<sup>2</sup> For this approach, see McDowell (1998); recently, however, the author definitely abandoned propositionalist conceptualism in McDowell (2009).

properties. This sort of naïve realism ought to be suggested by the image of openness, if experience is characterized by the image, although, thought is not. However, it hardly seems that propositionalist conceptualism can take this naïve realism seriously by equating perceptions of concrete particulars with perceptions of facts that are abstract entities.

### **3. What Should Conceptualism be Motivated by?**

If naïve realism is plausible as a position that can distinguish perceptual experience from thought, should we abandon conceptualism? For my part, I want to pursue a form of conceptualism that is compatible with naïve realism. But I do not think (at least in this paper) that conceptualism is made plausible by the issue that motivated it in McDowell (1996), that is, the possibility of the empirical justification of belief. If conceptuality can be connected with justification only by way of the idea of propositional content, it would not be a good strategy to invoke the pre-philosophical intuition that experience can justify belief in order to argue in the favor of conceptualism. For then, as we have already seen, we could arrive only at a form of conceptualism that is propositionalist and therefore incompatible with naïve realism. Of course, when faced with the argument that justification needs conceptuality, we could continue to invoke the intuition. But there seems to be no such argument as yet.

Then, what should conceptualism be motivated by? In the Introduction above, I mentioned Sellars's thought that our sensory experience has the conceptual aspect in virtue of our having acquired a battery of conceptual capacities, a process that begins with our initiation into language. According to his hybrid conception of experience, such a change that happens in our perceptual capacities leaves our sense intact. But we should not ignore the alternative, according to which the change transforms our very sensory nature. Such a change obviously includes mere human beings' becoming persons as rational animals which can think and intentionally act. If the above is true, why is it not possible to think that our sensory consciousness comes to be informed essentially with conceptual capacities that we acquire? Thus, the philosophical context in which to investigate what determines our nature as persons can motivate conceptualism, which claims that the sensory and

conceptual aspects of experience are “even notionally inseparable.”<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Appealing To Demonstrative Phrases

Given that conceptualism can be motivated without necessarily leading to its propositionalist form, how seriously can the doctrine take naïve realism?

Sellars sometimes argues that there is a kind of perceptual experience whose conceptual content can't be reduced to proposition, considering the grammatical contrast between “seeing that-p” and “seeing O.” He points out that the content should be specified by a demonstrative phrase like “this such.” If perceiving, say, a red cube under normal conditions is non-propositional, it is supposed to have the conceptual content that is an analogue of the complex demonstrative phrase “this red cube”. It is true that this approach is attractive in that it points to a form of non-propositionalist conceptualism. However, taking into consideration the manner in which Sellars fits the approach into his hybrid conception of experience, it turns out that conceptualists cannot take recourse to it.

In Sellars (2002), the author elaborates a theory of perception that involves the approach in question, in the guise of a reading of Kant on the productive imagination. Sellars construes it as a unified power with both sensory and conceptual aspects, which are nevertheless intelligible independently of each other. The productive imagination, he says, plays two roles in producing an experience. It, *qua* a power of concept, forms a non-propositional thinking whose conceptual content is partly specifiable by, say, “this red cube”. And it, *qua* a power to image, constructs out of materials delivered by sense and imagination a “sense-image-model,” which is a point-of-viewish image of a red cube in front of the subject. These works are interdependent, which is supposed to explain the unique unity of the sensory and conceptual elements in the experience. This leads Sellars to claim that to experience a red cube is to (mis) take the sense-image-model as this red cube.

As he himself admits, this position amounts to a version of the repre-

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<sup>3</sup> Here I have McDowell's well-known notion of second nature in mind.

sentative theory of perception (ibid.,§28). Conceptualists cannot accept such a theory, as it clashes with their required naïve realism. However, in a sense Sellars takes naïve realism more seriously than conceptualists do. For when Sellars says that sensible features we encounter in experience are “*actual* features of the sense-image-structure” as well as “items conceptualized” (ibid.,§23; my emphasis), he seems to try to capture the concreteness of experience. It is true that conceptualists can respect the particularity of experience by appealing to the idea of a “demonstrative” conceptual content that is not propositional. But since the content is abstract in a way that it can be grasped even after an original experience passed away, it cannot exhaust the concrete content—for instance, a *visible* scene—that the experience makes available only during its persistence.

#### **4. The Conception of Visual Experience as Analogous to Drawing a Picture.**

Is there no form of conceptualism that accommodates both the particularity and concreteness of experience? I think that the very idea of thinking in color can provide a clue to such a form.

Sellars originally introduces the idea of thinking in color in order to characterize artistic performances, such as painting. This makes it plausible to say that visual perception is, as it were, drawing a picture. Consider, for example, drawing an apple in front of one. It is natural to think that the action involves the actualization of a capacity associated with the concept *apple*. Of course, there can be some cases in which the capacity is not actualized in that sort of action. However, it seems that in many cases the concept *apple* essentially contributes to drawing the apple. And the same thing will be true of concepts of color and shape, which are associated with sensible features of it or its picture.

Now what we have to clarify is the point of conceiving the conceptual character of visual perception in terms of that of drawing. Notice that in this conception, the visual experience is modeled upon the *act* of drawing, but not upon the *picture* that is drawn. For modeling an experience upon a picture threatens to result in a representative theory that says that something like Sellars’s image-model is produced in mind when an apple is looked at.

Nevertheless, we can recognize something corresponding to a picture in the context of visual perception, without embracing such a theory. The something is a visible scene that consists of concrete particulars, such as an apple and its instantiated sensible qualities. Furthermore, a picture is also the same kind of something visible; a picture of a red apple is a reproduction of its appearance, in which relevant sensible qualities are instantiated as concrete particulars. Therefore, both the visual experience and drawing, even if they are actualizations of conceptual capacities, have particular concrete contents—which are a visible scene and a picture, respectively.

As far as I know, no conceptualist has ever considered the possibility of modeling a visual experience upon an act of drawing. Given this fact, it seems to me that conceptualists should try to domesticate Sellars's idea that visual perception is a thinking in color "in a sense most difficult to analyze," though Sellars himself was not any sort of conceptualist.

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