

# A Defense of Nonconceptual Contents

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## Abstract

The debate over whether perceptual experience includes nonconceptual contents is not only an interesting problem in itself, but has important bearings on other questions in philosophy, especially epistemology and philosophy of mind. The contemporary debate has two sides. On one side, philosophers such as John McDowell think that all perception is necessarily conceptual. On the other side, philosophers such as Christopher Peacocke think that not only are there nonconceptual contents in our perceptions but that these contents ground our knowledge claims. In this paper I first outline the arguments and the motivations McDowell and Peacocke advance in favor of their views. I then argue that both sides, to one extent or another, get it right. I argue that McDowell is correct to insist that nonconceptual contents do not play a role in knowledge but that Peacocke is nonetheless correct in stating that nonconceptual contents are a part of our perceptual lives. I argue that while nonconceptual contents are a rich part of our sensory awareness, it would be untenable to state that they play a role in our knowledge acquisition. In the concluding section I explain why a robust characterization of the nonconceptual contents I defend is in principle an impossible task.

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## Introduction

The debate over whether or not we experience nonconceptual contents is divisive in contemporary philosophy. A main claim of my thesis is that this debate partially continues because the two sides do not directly address each other's concerns. One side of the argument, here represented by John McDowell, argues that every aspect of our perceptual lives is conceptual. According to this view, I not only see an object conceptually, but every aspect of my perceptual experience of the object is conceptual, from its color to its taste. This conceptualist viewpoint is motivated by epistemological considerations. I argue that a strictly epistemological perspective misses out on some of our phenomenology. The other side, here represented by Christopher Peacocke, argues that there are some aspects of awareness which are nonconceptual and, furthermore, that nonconceptual experiences ground our acquisition of knowledge. This nonconceptualist viewpoint is motivated by a desire to characterize our phenomenology correctly. I argue that a strictly phenomenological perspective mischaracterizes our epistemological situation. My project here is to further characterize the disagreement between the two sides over nonconceptual contents and then to give my diagnosis. I stay true to both epistemology and phenomenology by arguing that Peacocke is correct to point out that nonconceptual contents are elements of our perceptual lives, but that McDowell is also correct that it is impossible that they play a role in knowledge.

I am motivated to explore this topic because the question of nonconceptual contents is one that I find intriguing in itself. However, it is even more interesting because the way the question is answered has profound implications for other areas of philosophy as well. As Peacocke states, "nonconceptual content is inseparable from some fundamental issues: about the individuation of conceptual content; about the nature of concept possession; about the nature of

rationality; about the relation between animal and human perception; and even about our conception of objectivity” (Peacocke, 2001a, 1). My arguments have bearings on all of these issues, as will be apparent to those interested in these topics.

I begin by outlining the debate concerning whether or not there is a Given (a nonconceptual aspect of our awareness which grounds knowledge) in perceptual experience. I give both the Given Endorser’s story of how we come to be knowledgeable beings and the Given Denier’s story, explaining why the Given Denier’s story is the more tenable. The next section gives the appropriate background for my explication of McDowell’s argument as it is the Denier’s argument from which McDowell builds his more dramatic claim that every aspect of our perceptual lives is conceptual. I then outline the nonconceptualist answer to McDowell’s claim by describing Peacocke’s critiques of McDowell, followed by McDowell’s rebuttal of Peacocke’s worries.

After reconstructing the current state of the controversy, I provide my diagnosis of it. In particular, I argue that McDowell is correct to claim that all perceptions which are relevant to knowledge claims are conceptual and that Peacocke is correct to insist on the existence of nonconceptual contents in our perceptual experience. In the concluding section I will briefly review the principal arguments for each position. Finally, I explain that though I defend nonconceptual contents, giving a robust characterization of these contents is a difficult if not an impossible task.

### The Myth of the Given

In the debate over nonconceptual contents, the term “Given” refers to that hypothetical element in perception which is nonconceptual and serves as the grounding for all of our concepts and knowledge. There has been much debate about the existence of a Given. As will become

clear in subsequent sections, a review of this debate will help us understand the shape of the controversy over the possibility of nonconceptual contents. In this section I give an account of the Given Endorser's genesis story of knowledge, an explanation of why the Given Endorser's story is untenable, and finally the Given Denier's genesis story.

The Endorser's genesis story of knowledge begins with nonconceptual awareness of our perceptions. In this picture, nonconceptual awareness is the same for knowledgeable observers as it is for nonrational animals. There is some draw to this idea. After all, when we see a red ball dropped into an animal cage at the zoo we observe the animal react as if taking notice of it as we do, pick it up as if it sees similar dimensions that we do, and if a ball of another color were dropped into the cage we might see it differentiate colors as we do. In short, while animals do not possess concepts of the ball and its properties, they seem to recognize all the sensory data that rational, concept-possessing humans do.

Given Endorsers argue that one moves from existing as a being with only animal-like awareness to becoming a knowledgeable being through recognizing common elements in our awareness. For example, after having been aware of a red apple, a red ball, his mother's red dress, and a red block, Baby Tommy would recognize that all of these objects have something in common. When he sees a cherry, he will be able to recognize that it has the same thing in common that the dress and the ball did. For the Given Endorser, this recognition of the property red exists independent from Tommy's ability to place the experiences all under the concept (which for the Given Endorser is language's marker of some subjective feature of our experience), "red." Regardless of his language abilities, Tommy can recognize a property by extrapolating properties from his perceptual experience.

After having used one's reasoning to extrapolate the existence of certain properties from one's perceptions (which, for the Endorser, are not inherently conceptual, but may be conceptualized), the Endorser believes one can have knowledge of things. So once one has recognized "red" as a property (regardless of whether or not one knows the word for "red") and "cherry" as a property (again, regardless of whether or not one knows the word for "cherry") one can come to conclusions like "All cherries are red." One does this by having taken note of all the sensory input one has had of fruits that appear a certain way, noting common properties available in subjective experience, combining properties in certain ways, and drawing conclusions. So, in short, the Endorser's picture of knowledge acquisition goes like this: first we just have the kind of base awareness of our perceptual experience that animals do, then we use our reasoning to extrapolate certain properties from our experience, and finally after recognizing these properties we can come to have knowledge by generalizing based on our sensory experience.

The Given Denier pushes back against the Given Endorser by prioritizing how things are objectively as opposed to how things are privately. In everyday life we have the ability to talk about both how things are privately and how things are objectively. Indeed, it is perfectly comprehensible that I would say that those leaves are brown (an objective statement about something independent of my perceptions) but that they look red to me in this light (a statement about how things privately are with me). The issue is not whether we can make both kinds of statements, but which is necessary for the other. By stating that we have animal-like nonconceptual awareness before we have knowledge, the Given Endorser argues that our awareness of how things seem to us is prior to our awareness of how things are.

For example, let us suppose that Professor Macbeth and I sit down to a plate of grilled asparagus. She and I could come to an agreement concerning how things objectively are with the

asparagus. For instance, we could both agree that it is a little on the chewy side and that it is more bitter than sweet. Similarly, if I said it was buttery Professor Macbeth could correct me since our particular plate of asparagus was not prepared with butter. Even if I were to say that the asparagus tasted buttery to me she could correct me and say that it did not taste buttery, rather the taste sensation I have is what asparagus tastes like when cooked with olive oil. However, if I were to state that I simply do not like the taste of asparagus and that it tastes unappealing to me, it would be pointless for Professor Macbeth to argue with me. While she actually loves the taste of asparagus, she could not present evidence to convince me that it is actually delicious when I find the taste repulsive. This example demonstrates the difference between knowledge claims and how things are privately. There is a matter of fact about whether or not the asparagus is one of the more bitter or sweet vegetables or whether it is buttery whereas there is no matter of fact about whether or not it is delicious. The question is whether I first recognize how the asparagus privately seems to me or whether I first recognize objective truths about the asparagus. The Given Endorsers say the former. They would argue that, in line with their genesis story, that I must first have awareness of my own subjective experience of the asparagus before I can come to understand universal truths about asparagus.

The Given Denier pushes back on this notion by pointing out that if we started out with only private awareness of how things seem to us that it would be impossible to ever attain knowledge of the outside world. Knowledge claims are, in principle, things that one can be right or wrong about, whereas one's private experience cannot be questioned. Indeed, the Deniers will state that it would be impossible to move from private subjective experience to objective knowledge because one cannot build claims about how things objectively are with only subjective data. While the view that we have awareness of the outside world before we have



awareness of private experience can at first seem counter-intuitive, Wilfrid Sellars and other Given Deniers show that actually our awareness of how things seem to us is dependent on first having awareness of objective truths. To demonstrate this, I compare the Endorser's and the Denier's respective genesis stories.

The Given Deniers acknowledge that human beings do not begin life as creatures who can be aware of objective truths. Rather, humans must go through the process of being acculturated into the linguistic community before their eyes can be opened to how things are. Already there are some key differences between the Given Endorser and the Given Denier. In the Endorser's picture, language does not play a key role in our acquisition of knowledge. The Endorser may concede that language plays a key role in our ability to communicate our knowledge but argue that our acquisition of knowledge itself is an internal process. The Endorser would argue that recognition of properties and acquisition of knowledge comes independent of any acculturation into a linguistic community or imposition of concepts. For the Endorser, one could never be part of a linguistic community and still come to have knowledge akin to "all cherries are red."

However, for the Deniers, being acculturated into the linguistic community is necessary for a subject to acquire knowledge. They argue that knowledge is based on what is objectively true and therefore cannot originate with internal, nonconceptual experience. Rather, in order to be the kind of being who can make judgments about what is the case, one must have one's experience mediated through concepts, which originate externally. So one is first aware of asparagus as objects which are classified under the linguistic entity "asparagus." Then, one becomes aware of one's private experience of the object only insofar as one questions whether the way one's experience seems is an accurate depiction of how things are. For example, I may

say that an object a few feet away *looks* like asparagus to indicate that I am unsure whether it is in fact asparagus or some other thin, green vegetable. So I will use the language of “looks” to withhold endorsement of the claim that the object in front of me is asparagus. It is only after I have become fully acculturated into the conceptual realm that I can make judgments about how things look to me without necessarily formulating a fact claim about its relation to how things are. This is because to be aware of how things look I must first become fully acculturated into the realm of concepts. Indeed, to say that an object looks like asparagus to me I must first have the concept of “asparagus” as well as a concept of myself as an observer (the concept of self is described in more detail in the My Defense of Nonconceptual Contents section).

The Denier argues that after one has become acculturated into the linguistic community enough to be able to make knowledge claims about both how things are in the world and one’s perceptual experience, one always perceives conceptually. So I am aware of the vegetable as the concept “asparagus” not because I superimpose the linguistic label “asparagus” onto some sense data. Rather, I perceive *through* concepts and so as I perceive the vegetable, *I perceive it as asparagus*. For me to perceive asparagus as such, I must first have learned the concept (which applies to a set of practices in the linguistic community) from language, which originates externally. I did not come up with the word “asparagus” on my own or even the proper structure for making a judgment like “before me is asparagus.” It is only because I now perceive in terms of public concepts that I have a capacity, while fallible, to take in how things are.

The reason the Denier’s story allows us to have knowledge in a way that the Endorser’s story does not is because in the Endorser’s story there is no distance between one’s experience and what is the case. Without distance between one’s experience and the state of things, knowledge claims cannot get a grip as there is no outside authority on how the properties one

extrapolated can be used with regard to one's own private experience. Whatever seems right is right, which means we could not correctly talk about what is objectively so. There would be no way to be wrong since there would be no external criteria to tell if we are accurate in our fact claims. The fact that the Endorsers do not give a tenable account of knowledge acquisition is due to the fact that they never explain how, in starting from subjective mental states, we can gain objective knowledge. While they propose that we extrapolate from subjective experience, they state that this extrapolation is based on private judgments. Without formative influence from the external world, it is impossible that one could go from reasoning with only subjective data to an understanding of universal, objective truths.

The Given Denier, in making acculturation into the concepts of the linguistic community a prerequisite for being the kind of being who can make knowledge claims, does not run into problems in explaining how humans can come to be knowledgeable. For the Denier, the realm of concepts should be understood not as an external label that imposes itself on one's nonconceptual experience to make it conceptual. Rather, once one is born into the linguistic community, concepts mediate one's awareness. I see the asparagus as asparagus, not as some mass of greenness which I have to translate into conceptual language. In the next section, I demonstrate how McDowell takes the Denier's view even further, arguing that not only is all of our awareness conceptual, but every aspect of our awareness is conceptual and so potentially part of a knowledge claim.

### McDowell's Argument

While in later sections I will critique elements of both conceptualist views like McDowell's and nonconceptualist views like Peacocke's, in this and the next section I present their views and the debate with minimal comment in order to set up the necessary background

for my argument. In the previous section I presented an argument for the Given Denier's picture of how we come to acquire knowledge. McDowell takes the Denier's view further, proposing that not only must all knowledge be conceptual, but so must all perceptual experiences. In this section I will relate McDowell's view and give an account of his reasoning. In doing this I use some of McDowell's debate with Gareth Evans over whether it is conceivable for perception to be entirely conceptual. I will explicate the nonconceptualist's argument with McDowell in the next section and so will here just use the exchange with Evans to illuminate McDowell's view rather than to exhaust the debate.

McDowell argues, as would any Given Denier, that once we are acculturated into the linguistic community (a process which I gave a brief explanation of in the previous section), our ability to conceptualize is always operative; it cannot be turned off. In other words, we start to perceive *through* concepts rather than perceiving and *then* conceptualizing our perceptions. Indeed, after we have been acculturated into the linguistic community we perceive in a way which is fundamentally different from our animal-like relationship to objects before acculturation. Animals and pre-acculturated human beings merely have non-rational reactions to objects. But as an acculturated, mature perceiver I see objects *as concepts*. Even if an animal that was completely new to me and did not look like anything familiar walked in, I would view it conceptually. I might not be able to name it or make a truth claim about it right away, but because of the fact that my conceptual capabilities are always operative I will see it in such a way that, after reflection, I will be able to name and make judgments about it. For instance I might judge that it is an animal or at the very least a moving object. A nonrational animal is never able to recognize objects in a way which enables judgment, but as rational animals we are

always making judgments, or at least perceiving in such a way so that we may make judgments concerning our perceptions.

So far McDowell's argument builds off of the Given Denier's story of how we come to have knowledge (described in the previous section) by further describing how humans' perceptual lives are always connected with the conceptual. However, he makes a dramatic next move by saying that *all* aspects of our perceptual experience are conceptual and therefore in the proper form to be part of a knowledge claim. He states that "our perceptual relation to the world is conceptual all the way out to the world's impacts on our receptive capacities" (McDowell, 2009b, 308). As conceptual beings, he argues, conceptualizing is just how we perceive.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, in Mind and World McDowell states that:

the relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity. It is not that they are exercised on an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity...In experience one takes in, for instance sees, that things are thus and so...In the view I am urging, the conceptual contents that sit closest to the impact of external reality on one's sensibility are not already, qua conceptual some distance away from that impact (McDowell, 1994, 9).

Here McDowell argues not just that all knowledge is conceptual, but that all "receptivity" and "experience" are conceptual. When we perceive, all aspects of the sensual "impact of external reality" are conceptual, or perceived in terms of facts or as being "thus and so." So not only is all awareness conceptual, but *every aspect of awareness is conceptual*. So when I see the asparagus stalk before me, it is not just that there are some aspects of my experience that can be used in

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<sup>1</sup> While McDowell may disagree that he is talking about perception generally, I will continue assuming this robust interpretation for the purposes of my paper since much of the literature surrounding nonconceptual contents assumes that this is his view. Even if McDowell did not himself mean his work to be taken this way, the argument is worth addressing regardless of his endorsement of it.

making future knowledge claims, which are conceptual. Rather, I already perceive it in conceptual form not only in that I see the asparagus as “asparagus” but also in that every aspect of my perception is perceived in terms of judgments or facts. In other words, the nonconceptualist says that we first receive raw data and then conceptualize it but McDowell does not think there is any raw data. Rather, McDowell argues that all of our perceptions come to us already in conceptual form. So when I see the asparagus I perceive a fact claim such as “that is an asparagus stalk before me” and/or “that asparagus is grilled.” In McDowell’s view, it would be contradictory to be aware of an aspect of one’s experience without perceiving it in conceptual form. So not only is McDowell agreeing with the Given Denier that knowledge acquisition is an entirely conceptual process, but he goes further to argue that all awareness is entirely conceptual.

Of course, one could expect a radical view like McDowell’s would have some push-back against it. Evans is one proponent of nonconceptual content that provides such push-back. Evans argues that McDowell’s view does not leave room for the phenomenology of a new experience. For instance, he argues that a consequence of McDowell’s picture of perception is that merely by knowing that the concept of a shade (let us say scarlet) exists that one would be able to know what the experience of perceiving scarlet would be like “in all its determinate detail” before one had ever come in contact with a scarlet-colored object (McDowell, 1994, 58). So by knowing that there is a shade which is darker than what we call “true red” that is labeled “scarlet” we should, according to Evan’s reading of McDowell, be able to know what it is like to experience scarlet. This argument, if correct, would make McDowell’s view seem very silly since of course we cannot capture every aspect of a shade’s detail prior to having the perceptual experience of it. Indeed, our concepts of colors are “coarser in grain than our abilities to discriminate shades, and therefore unable to capture the fine detail of color experience” (McDowell, 1994, 56). By

referring to experience as “fine-grained” and concepts as “coarser in grain,” Evans points to the phenomenology of our perception. It certainly seems as though my experience of scarlet is richer and more detailed (or more finely grained) than merely imagining what the shade “scarlet” might look like after hearing the word. In other words, Evans argues that it is not as if in knowing that there is a darker shade of red called “scarlet” that I can therefore imagine what it is like to experience scarlet. Rather, I *merely have the concept* of scarlet. According to Evans, to know scarlet’s “determinate detail” a nonconceptual, animal-like awareness of the shade is required which goes beyond the mere concept.

McDowell responds to Evans’ “shade” argument by pointing out the power of demonstratives, or the ability for us to gesture at experience conceptually before we have unique vocabulary for it. McDowell states that:

one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like ‘that shade,’ in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of the sample. We need to be careful about what sort of conceptual capacity this is. We had better not think it can be exercised only when the instance that is supposed to enable its possessor to embrace in thought is available for use as a sample in bringing linguistic expression to it...We can ensure that the very same capacity to embrace a color in mind can in principle persist into the future, if only for a short time, and that, having persisted, it can be used also in thoughts about what is by then the past, if only the recent past. What is in play here is a recognitional capacity, possibly quite short-lived, that sets in with experience (McDowell, 1994, 57).

In other words, the fact that we conceptualize new experiences like the experience of a new shade of a color is not disproven by Evans’ contention that our color concepts are less fine-grained than our experience of colors. Because we have been acculturated into the linguistic community, we already have concepts (such as the concept of a shade of red) which allow our awareness to coarise with the conceptualization of it. Since we have concepts such as that of a color and that of a shade of a color, these concepts enable us to have awareness of a new

color/shade as we experience it; the experience effectively gives us the relevant concept, e.g., of scarlet. This is evidenced by our ability to express our conceptualization of a new shade at the time of our experience by saying such things as “that shade.” This conceptualization is not dependent on the continued immediate experience of the shade but can persist so long as the viewer’s memory of the experience persists. So the fact that as I am experiencing a scarlet-colored object for the first time I can make judgments as to whether it is darker or lighter than other shades, for example, demonstrates that I am conceptualizing it as I perceive it. If I had not perceived the object conceptually, I should not be able to make judgments about it as I perceive it since, as discussed in the previous section, judgments are necessarily conceptual.

To clarify further, McDowell argues that some concepts such as those of colors are not determinate, or fixed prior to experience. In fact, there is a way in which our concepts can be determinable, or shaped in our experience. For instance, a shirt can look striped without looking a certain number of stripes. We conceptualize the shirt as “striped” but in a determinable, non-specific way. However, concepts can be as determinate as necessary as in cases where a shirt *does* look a certain number of stripes. Our experience of a shirt that merely appears “striped” to us is completely conceptual as much so as our experience of a shirt that we experience as having thirteen stripes is. This is evidenced by the communicable nature of my experience and the fact that *my experience is shaped in such a way so that I can make judgments about it*. I am in the position at the time I perceive the shirt and for the amount of time my awareness is stored in my memory thereafter to make certain judgments about the shirt. My ability to make judgments about the garment, whether I perceive it as simply “striped” or as possessing thirteen stripes, is evidence of the fact that I perceived it in conceptual form since judgments are necessarily



conceptual. Concepts such as that of a particular shade of, say, red do not pre-determine or constrict my experience but coarise with and, according to McDowell, exhaust my awareness.

### The Nonconceptual Response

In the last section I explained how McDowell expands on the Given Denier's story of knowledge acquisition by arguing that not only is all knowledge conceptual but all perceptual awareness is conceptual. In this section I present the nonconceptualist push-back to this view, using Christopher Peacocke's nonconceptualist arguments. He pushes the Evans argument discussed in the last section further, using three main arguments: that concepts do not capture "what it is like" to have an experience, that aspects of our perceptual experience are shared with animals and that these shared experiences must be nonconceptual, and that McDowell's account of concepts in our experience does not satisfy a "non-circularity requirement." Peacocke additionally argues that nonconceptual contents inform our knowledge claims in important ways.

Peacocke directly addresses McDowell's argument that using demonstratives to express the concept of a novel experience exhausts the content of one's awareness with his "what it is like" argument. He states that:

...there exist uses of the perceptual-demonstrative 'that' unsupplemented with a concept, and which do slice just as finely as fine-grained colors, shapes, and other properties and magnitudes given in perception. My own view is that the opponent of conceptualism should certainly acknowledge the existence of such unsupplemented demonstratives. For each fine-grained property, relation or magnitude given in perception, the anti-conceptualist should hold that there is some nonconceptual way in which it is given. An unsupplemented perceptual-demonstrative 'that' made available to a thinker because he perceives something in a given nonconceptual way is a demonstrative concept in good standing. The lack of conceptual supplementation does not lead to objectionable indeterminacy of reference, because the way which makes the demonstrative available resolves any alleged indeterminacy... (Peacocke, 2001b, 610).

So Peacocke interprets the role of demonstratives differently than McDowell, stating that when viewers express the color they are enjoying as “that shade,” the demonstrative serves to clarify, in conceptual terms, what the perceiver is seeing. However, while the experience is then *conceptualized insofar as one can communicate that one is having an experience*, that does not mean that the *experience itself* is fully conceptualized. Indeed, there remains a “nonconceptual way in which it [the color] is given.” When one describes the fine-grained phenomenology of any experience, one must “make use of the notion of the *way* in which some property or relation is given in the experience” (Peacocke, 2001a, 240). It is this qualitative aspect of experience that McDowell’s radically conceptualist view of perceptual experience misses.

Frank Jackson provides an example which illustrates this point.<sup>2</sup> In *Epiphenomenal Qualia* he imagines an individual who had the capacity to recognize a shade of red no other human could (Jackson, 1982, 128). The individual could look at a set of color swatches that we experience as all identical, e.g., they are all scarlet-colored, and notice that some of them are lighter than the others, referring to them as “that shade.” We could conceptualize his experience of “that shade” insofar as we understand that when he says “that shade” he means he is having a color experience that is not identical to scarlet. We could even do experiments that showed that he really did experience the shade and indeed that it is a slightly lighter shade than scarlet by having him point to where it is on the color spectrum and having him undergo a number of experiments where he had to differentiate the shade from other shades of red. For the conceptualist, these judgments we make about the individual’s experience of the shade is supposed to show the sense in which the person’s perceptual ability is conceptual.

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson originally utilized this argument (which he calls the “Knowledge Argument”) to argue for the existence of qualia in light of Physicalist claims to the contrary. However, Jackson’s argument can also serve Peacocke’s purposes here.

However, there is a way in which we could never understand “what it is like” for this individual to experience the shade of red. We could conceptualize the shade generally and even conceptualize certain aspects of the experience insofar as we have conceptual knowledge from his reports and the experiments we ran. So we can conceptualize that it is lighter in color than the shade we perceive as “scarlet” but darker than the color we perceive as “true red.” However, there is still a way in which we will never truly understand what it is like for him to experience the shade as qualitatively different from scarlet since we will never be able to. Even once we have a name for the shade and call it “xyz,” we would still only be able to understand what it is like to experience the shade *conceptually*. We would not know what it would be like to distinguish xyz from scarlet. This “what it is like” element, according to Peacocke, is the nonconceptual element of perception that McDowell’s fully conceptualist view misses.

Peacocke’s second argument against the conceptualist states that there are common perceptual experiences we share with animals. From this, he argues that such common experiences must be nonconceptual. His evidence for shared experience between humans and nonrational animals comes from animals’ behavior. After all, we see dogs and cats avoid obstacles in their way as if they perceive the obstacle as we do, with similar dimensions, etc. After concluding that we share experience with animals, Peacocke argues that the shared features must be nonconceptual. Concepts arise from a linguistic community and since animals are not a part of our linguistic community, our shared perceptual features must be nonconceptual. Peacocke argues,

While being reluctant to attribute concepts to the lower animals, many of us would want to insist that the property of (say) representing a flat brown surface as being a certain distance from one can be common to the perceptions of humans and lower animals...It is literally the same representational property that the two experiences possess, even if the human experience also has richer representational

contents in addition. If the lower animals do not have states with conceptual content, but some of their perceptual states have contents in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual (Peacocke, 2001b, 614).

Furthermore, Peacocke, like other nonconceptualists such as Evans, holds that this nonconceptual, animal sensory awareness “provide[s] the necessary basis for more flexible forms of thought” and that this awareness “can also exist in absence of those more sophisticated abilities” (Peacocke, 2001b, 615). So, in short, the “what it’s like” element of our perception is a shared trait with animals and this nonconceptual awareness is the basis of our higher capacities, such as the ability to make knowledge claims.

Peacocke’s third and final argument against the conceptualist comes in the form of his “requirement of non-circularity” (McDowell, 1994, 166). This requirement demands “that the concept in question not be used in a specification of the content of a conceptual state” (McDowell, 1994, 166). In other words, the Given Denier’s genesis story, an argument that McDowell and other conceptualists assume correct, gives an unsatisfying account by appealing to concepts to explain themselves. For example, let us suppose that I, as a Given Denier, were asked by a Given Endorser why I consider the apple on my desk to be red. I would say that I consider the apple to be red because I learned it was so from being acculturated into the conceptual framework of the linguistic community. Now that I have been acculturated, I would say, I just see the apple as it is, which is red. So the reason for me thinking the apple is red is because I was acculturated into understanding what being red entails and so see the apple as red. However, this does not really answer the question the Endorser is asking me.

The Endorser could insist that they wanted to know what it was about *my experience* that inspired me to apply the concept “red” to it. To this I would reply that the apple just appeared

red. So the reason I give for applying the concept “red” to the apple is that the apple appears red to me, an unsatisfying account for the Endorser. Indeed, McDowell, a Denier, winds up saying something like:

to possess the concept *red* one must be disposed—if one takes it that the lighting conditions and so forth are of the right sort—to make judgments in whose content that concept is applied predicatively to an object presented to one in visual experience, *when the object looks red to one*, and for that reason. But this use of ‘looks red’ presupposes, on the part of an audience to whom the account might be addressed, not just the concept red, which is implicit in the idea of being able to have things look red to one. And this is just what the account is supposed to be an account of (McDowell, 1994, 167).

So McDowell’s account of concepts is unsatisfying for Peacocke because it does not give an account of why my experience of the apple is red without appealing to the concept itself in the explanation.

Peacocke avoids such a circular account of concepts. If he were asked why I saw the apple as red, he would say it was because I knew how to appropriately label a certain kind of Given experience. By referring to something outside the conceptual realm in explaining the reason for concepts or their content, Peacocke thinks he gives a more tenable account of why we apply certain concepts to certain experiences.

In the Myth of the Given section I gave the two dominant accounts of how we come to have knowledge: we either come to have knowledge through extracting properties from our own private experience *or* through concepts, which are learned from the external linguistic community. However, Peacocke, in asserting that concepts must originate from a Given, argues that the latter option is untenable because even concepts must originate in a Given. If Peacocke were right in saying that concepts are Given-grounded this would be devastating not only for all

conceptualists like McDowell, but for all Given Deniers whose theories about perception work from the Denier's claims about knowledge acquisition.

### McDowell's Rebuttal

In this section I present McDowell's rebuttals to Peacocke's arguments from the previous section. In detailing these rebuttals, it will become clear why McDowell believes his fully conceptualist picture is tenable even in light of Peacocke's critiques. In the next section I will argue that McDowell's defense of the Given Denier's view of knowledge acquisition is strong, while his defense of completely conceptual perceptual awareness does not answer Peacocke's "what it is like" argument. However, in this section I will only present McDowell's rejoinders to Peacocke's worries.

McDowell's rebuttal of the "what it is like" argument begins with his insistence that concepts can and do exhaust one's perceptual awareness. He states that, for example, in the case of seeing a shade of red one has never experienced before, saying "that shade" *does* capture all of one's sensory experience. He states that "we do not have all these concepts in advance, but we do have whichever we need, exactly when we need them" (McDowell, 1994, 170). So it is not that I already have the concept of scarlet before I have experienced it. Rather, as I am experiencing the shade I am also conceptualizing it since all rational humans perceive objects and qualities in conceptual form. Our ability to make judgments in the "presence of the original sample" serves as evidence of how our immediate awareness of, for instance, color, just *is* conceptual as opposed to being nonconceptual and having concepts superimposed on it. McDowell notes that the sensory experience of a color is an example of a concept which is "suited to figure in judgments that are directly responsive to experience" (McDowell, 1994, 7). Because one had the concept of "color" and "shade" before one experienced scarlet specifically, one can use that prior

conceptual knowledge to conceptualize one's experience of scarlet. Indeed, this happens concurrently with our experience of the shade. One does not experience a sense datum and then conceptualize it, rather by having experienced an object one has already conceptualized it. Surely, the experience of scarlet is more fine-grained than just the letters that make up its name, but *all fine-grained properties are perceived through concepts*. Thus, one conceptualizes all the fine-grained aspects of experience as one becomes aware of the shade. In other words, one's concepts of one's sensory experience may *coarise with* the experience.

McDowell also has a response to Peacocke's contention that animals' behavior indicates an element of awareness which is akin to ours. Awareness involves self-awareness and perceiving objects as they are. These traits can only come after one has been acculturated into the linguistic community and perceives conceptually. When a beagle nudges the ball with his nose this indicates that it has responses (maybe even somewhat sophisticated responses) to objects in its environment, but not that it is aware of the ball as such and as itself as an observer of the ball. However, when I and other mature humans interact with a ball, we are aware of ourselves as that which is bouncing the ball and the ball *as a ball*. Even if I were not actively articulating "My hand is touching this object, which is red and a ball, in such a way to as make it bounce," if someone were to ask me what I was doing I would be able to make such a judgment. The fact that our awareness is organized in such a way as to make judgments about our behaviors is evidence that our awareness is a phenomenon that nonrational animals do not experience when interacting with objects.

Finally, I will give an account of McDowell's counter to Peacocke's "non-circularity" requirement. McDowell states that "the non-circularity requirement is essentially an insistence on sideways-on accounts of concepts" which demand an explanation of concepts from outside

the conceptual realm (McDowell, 1994, 168). McDowell argues that such a side-ways on account simply is not possible. Indeed, McDowell says that this sideways way of explaining concepts, which insists that nonconceptual contents are the reason for why we conceptualize experience as we do, presents a “picture [that] places the world outside a boundary within a system we have come to understand; that means it cannot depict anything genuinely recognizable as an understanding of a set of concepts with empirical substance” (McDowell, 1994, 35). So let us suppose that I were looking at the red ball and were asked why I perceive it as a red ball and do not conceptualize it as some other object and I were to say “because there are certain nonconceptual experiences I have of it which make it apparent that my experience fits into that category but which I cannot detail to you because it is outside the realm of concepts and therefore of what is communicable to others.” My response would not have any explanatory power. How could someone be satisfied with a response that my experience is private and so the fact that I perceive the ball as a ball and not as a dinosaur is really just because of the way I happen to perceive? Not only would this be unsatisfying, but it would be inaccurate. As discussed in the Myth of the Given section earlier in this paper, we rather come to see objects as what they are from learning how the world is from the linguistic community, which is external to us. If our concepts came from labeling properties of our own internal experience, then we would not be able to produce knowledge claims.

Not only does McDowell reject the viability of a genesis story of concepts which provides a “non-circular” or “sideways-on” account as Peacocke’s does, but he charges that Peacocke does not even satisfy his own requirement of non-circularity, as misguided as the requirement itself may be. McDowell points out that Peacocke never explains exactly what the supposed contents of experience are, just that they are nonconceptual. Peacocke thinks he gets



around this problem by explaining that the nonconceptual elements of concepts are not necessarily the content of concepts, but a *reason* for concepts. However, McDowell would point out that “the required externality undermines the very intelligibility, here, of ‘for the reason that.’” (McDowell, 1994, 1). In other words, it is contradictory for Peacocke to point to nonconceptual contents as a reason for concepts. Reasons are rationale for accepting or denouncing a possible knowledge claim. Because, as shown in the Myth of the Given section, reasons for knowledge claims must be publically available, Peacocke can not use nonconceptual contents, which are necessarily private, as a reason for concepts.

In the example of why I perceive the ball as a ball, Peacocke wants it to be the case that my nonconceptual contents serve as a *reason* for my perception of the ball as a ball. However, knowledge claims concern themselves with what is the case and so can in principle be judged as correct or incorrect according to public standards. But nonconceptual contents are subjective and cannot be judged by others as right or wrong. Therefore, a nonconceptual content cannot serve as a reason for a knowledge claim since it is private and therefore not vulnerable to public evaluation. Given McDowell’s argument against the possibility of a sideways-on picture that Peacocke advocates and this exposition of the untenable nature of Peacocke’s particular sideways on view, McDowell holds that he has “no reason to suppose, and plenty of reason not to suppose, that it is always possible to give accounts of concepts in conformity with the non-circularity requirement” (McDowell, 1994, 169). Therefore, McDowell advocates that his fully conceptual picture should be privileged over Peacocke’s or any other side-ways on account of concepts.

## My Defense of Nonconceptual Contents

Now that I have outlined the current state of the debate surrounding nonconceptual contents I will give my diagnosis. In this section, I argue that McDowell is right to criticize Peacocke's account of the relationship between nonconceptual contents and knowledge, but that he is mistaken in his complete rejection of nonconceptual contents. There *are* nonconceptual contents in perception and these contents are a rich part of our perceptual lives. However, it would be wrong to assign any epistemological role to these contents or to liken them to the kind of perceptual experience that animals have, as Peacocke does.

A major problem with the current state of the debate concerning whether or not our perceptual awareness is completely conceptual is that the two sides (represented by McDowell and Peacocke respectively) are arguing with different aims in mind. McDowell characterizes concepts' role in perception with the goal of characterizing knowledge acquisition, whereas Peacocke focuses on concepts' role in perception with the goal of characterizing the phenomenology of our perceptual awareness. McDowell's concentration on epistemology leads him astray in his characterization of perception generally. He presents an impoverished view of our perceptual lives, leaving us with our entire awareness being able to be characterized in terms of seeing things as thus and so, as if our experience were merely in terms of facts and concepts. This characterization is impoverished since we do not just perceive objects as concepts and potential judgments. There is a rich, private aspect to our perceptual experience that goes beyond those aspects which are instruments for knowledge claims. It is as Peacocke points out, McDowell's purely conceptual view of awareness leaves out large aspects of the "what it is like" for us when perceiving.

For example, let us look at Professor Macbeth and I sharing a plate of asparagus again. I may take a bite of asparagus and declare that it tastes disgusting, but Professor Macbeth could take a taste of the same asparagus and exclaim that it is the most delicious thing she has ever tasted. Both of our experiences of the asparagus taste are conceptual in that we perceive it in such a way so that we could make judgments about its relative sweetness, bitterness, etc. Indeed, we could reach agreement on these properties after appropriate discussion. However, there is also an aspect of our experience which is not conceptual and so could not be decisively known. It is this aspect of our experience that leads us to come to different conclusions as to whether or not the asparagus is tasty. There is something truly different in our experiences, but this difference is not conceptual since it is not something which one can make knowledge claims about. I can know that Professor Macbeth thinks that the asparagus is delicious, but I can not experience what it is like for the asparagus to be delicious. This example shows that first-person experience of taste outruns our ability to conceptualize the experience. The fact that experience can outrun our ability to conceptualize demonstrates that there is something in our experience which concepts can not capture.

Of course, McDowell may counter that there *is* something conceptually different in our experiences. I conceptualized my experience as being “disgusting” and Professor Macbeth conceptualized her experience as “delicious.” But this line of rebuttal is weak since, as discussed in previous sections, the experience I am describing is not of the kind one can make knowledge claims about. Professor Macbeth and I could waste our time debating but we would never be able to come to a conclusion as to whether or not asparagus’s taste is pleasing since my unpleasant asparagus sensation and her pleasant asparagus sensation are private.

Whereas a knowledge claim in principle can be judged as right or wrong, my private sensation is manifest to me and cannot be questioned, the way asparagus tastes to me just is the way it is. However, here I should clarify that there are of course aspects of Professor Macbeth's experience of the asparagus as delicious which I can conceptualize. Indeed, I can see Professor Macbeth's facial expression and hear her articulate that the asparagus is pleasing to her and so conceptually understand her enjoyment of it. Similarly, my facial expression and other external expressions will allow Professor Macbeth to conceptualize my dissatisfaction. However, while I may *know* that asparagus is delicious to Professor Macbeth and she may *know* that asparagus is disgusting to me, I will never have an experience of the asparagus as delicious and she will never have an experience of the asparagus as disgusting. It is this kind of nonconceptual, private experience that McDowell does not allow for in his conceptualist picture. He ignores the fact that while all experience of objects may be conceptual, all experience is not therefore merely conceptual. Indeed, the ways things seem to us, the "what it's like" or subjective aspects of experience are also large parts of our perceptual lives.

While Peacocke is correct in stating that there are aspects of our experience that are nonconceptual, he is mistaken that these aspects play any role in our acquisition of knowledge. Peacocke stated that our nonconceptual awareness grounds knowledge, but this is not the case. Knowledge claims, those things which one can in principle be objectively right or wrong about, must be completely conceptual. As I explained in previous sections, since knowledge is about how things are objectively to everyone, knowledge must start from a public language which one is acculturated into. A foundation of a private experience cannot ground public truth. One cannot arrive at knowledge claims, which by nature are vulnerable to the assessment of others, from private experience. Others do not have access to one's private experience, but they do have

access to the same standards and structures encoded in the linguistic community. In short, the nonconceptualist sees knowledge acquisition as a purely internal process, with concepts as mere linguistic tags for aspects of internal experience. However, as I demonstrate in the Myth of the Given section, an internal process can not give rise to knowledge.

The Given Denier's story of knowledge acquisition (discussed in the Myth of the Given section), on the other hand, presents a perfectly tenable view of how we come to be able to be open to objective truth. In this picture, it is after acculturation into a linguistic community and concepts that we have the tools to be aware of how things are. After we become aware of objects through concepts we can see them in such a way as to make knowledge claims. McDowell rightly points out, as I related in the McDowell's Rebuttal section, that Peacocke's requirement of a sideways-on account of concepts is not a legitimate critique of the Denier's genesis story. For reasons already stated, it would be untenable to look outside the realm of concepts to explain them in any way.

McDowell is also right to critique Peacocke for suggesting that elements of our perceptual experience are shared with animals. While I agree with Peacocke that nonconceptual contents are an element of our experience, McDowell is correct to point out that once we are born into the space of reasons, or the linguistic community, we cannot go backwards. There is no part of us that remains a nonrational animal. Our nonconceptual experience, while not utilized in knowledge claims, is more sophisticated than animal brute responses.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Some would here object that we do have nonconceptual, animal-like experience, such as when we react to objects very quickly, an example being when an athlete reacts to a baseball coming towards her by catching it with her mitt. However, this is not animal-like nor is it nonconceptual. While the athlete may not be actively forming the judgment "I should reach up my hand so as to catch the baseball coming towards me," her perception is such so that she could make such judgments about what she perceives. The athlete sees the ball in such a way so that later when someone asks her what she perceived she could say

Our self-consciousness is an important part of what makes our experience more sophisticated than an animal's. One of the concepts that one learns when one is acculturated into the linguistic community is the concept of the self or awareness of "I". This concept is crucial to what differentiates our nonconceptual contents from animals' behaviors towards objects. I can recognize that it is I who have the experience of asparagus as disgusting, while an animal would merely have some kind of reaction to eating asparagus without cognizing it as *their* experience. It is this sense of personal possession of my nonconceptual experience which differentiates even my nonconceptual contents from any kind of perceptual experience resembling what nonrational animals have.

Notice that while my understanding of "I" is conceptual, this does not mean that the nonconceptual contents I perceive are wholly conceptual. Being acculturated into the linguistic realm makes all of our experiences, including the nonconceptual elements of them, uniquely human because it is this acculturation which gives us self-consciousness with the concept of the self. However, the fact that there is recognition that it is "I" who tastes the asparagus does not make the disgusting sensation any less private and unknowable. Rather, it just necessitates that my own private awareness of the disgusting taste is understood by me as mine.

In summary, I endorse McDowell's claim that knowledge acquisition is an entirely conceptual process. However, I disagree with McDowell that endorsing the Given Denier's story necessitates believing that every aspect of our perceptual experience is conceptual. Indeed, there are some aspects of our experience which outrun our ability to articulate and make judgments

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that she saw a baseball. The ability to make judgments about her experience makes it both conceptual and not animal-like, as discussed in the McDowell's Rebuttal section.

and are therefore nonconceptual. However, these experiences, while nonconceptual, are not animal-like since they are experienced from a self-conscious point of view.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have laid out the debate concerning nonconceptual contents as it stands today. The nonconceptualists, motivated by the need to stay true to the phenomenology of our experience, argue that there are nonconceptual elements in perception. However, McDowell, motivated to stay true to epistemology, denies that there exists a Given element of experience and further argues that every aspect of our perceptual experience is conceptual. In the previous section, I argue that the nonconceptualist view is wrong about the relationship between nonconceptual and conceptual contents and that McDowell gives an impoverished picture of our perceptual lives when he denies nonconceptual contents' place in experience. In line with this diagnosis of the debate, in the last section I argued that while nonconceptual experience is an important part of our perceptual lives, it does not play a role in our knowledge acquisition. This allows me to endorse nonconceptual elements' place in our perception without endorsing a Given since I argue that these nonconceptual elements do not ground knowledge claims.

However, I acknowledge that my account might be unsatisfying because it does not give a robust account of nonconceptual contents by giving something like an exhaustive definition which would encompass all such contents. While this paper gives examples that point to instances of nonconceptual content (such as the "what it is like" to experience the taste of asparagus or the color red), I have not provided such a definition. A natural route to take in this endeavor is to define nonconceptual contents by characterizing them as I implicitly do in this paper: they are those elements in perceptual experience which pick out private, phenomenal characters of our experience. However, while this definition is accurate, it is also lacking in its

ability to characterize what these private experiences really entail, or to more fully characterize what “what it is like” experiences feel like to the perceiver. The reason I do not give a robust account of nonconceptual contents is because it is in principle an impossible task. After all, a good portion of this paper is dedicated to arguing that nonconceptual contents cannot ground knowledge claims. Providing a robust characterization of nonconceptual experience is an impossible goal because such a characterization would have to characterize nonconceptual experience in terms of language and concepts. Since, as I argued, nonconceptual contents cannot be articulated conceptually, a definition of them in terms of concepts would be contradictory. However, it is possible for us to approach an understanding of nonconceptual contents by gesturing to instances in which there is a nonconceptual element present. In this paper I hope I point to enough examples of both conceptual and nonconceptual mental contents so that the reader can understand what nonconceptual contents are without a robust characterization.



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