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Concepts in Experience: An Essay on Conceptualism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Aaron Allen Schiller

Committee in charge:

Professor Rick Grush, Chair
Professor Jonathan Cohen
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2007
The Dissertation of Aaron Allen Schiller is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2007
For her love,
support,
and encouragement always,
I dedicate this work to my wife,
Denise Helene Brauer Schiller.
The level which a science has reached is determined by how far it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts.

- Martin Heidegger,

*Being and Time*, §3
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Heidegger said: “The ‘level which a science has reached is determined by how far it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts.’”\(^1\) By this accounting, the “science” responsible for understanding the nature of human experience ascends to the highest level. Questions concerning the nature of experience have never been so pressing; the most fundamental concepts never been so confused; and the methods of inquiry into its nature never been so contentious. Philosophers have lost hold of one of its most basic concepts: that of a concept. Our very understanding of who we are, and of what it’s like to be us, is at risk, if we do not find that hold. It is to such a task that this essay is devoted.

\(^1\) 1927, §3.
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Concepts in Experience: An Essay on Conceptualism

by

Aaron Allen Schiller

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, San Diego, 2007

Professor Rick Grush, Chair

Taking up the debate on nonconceptual content, I argue that while metaphysical issues in the philosophy of mind look to support the existence of content which is free from conceptualization, epistemological and phenomenological issues point the other direction. I argue that inasmuch as we are concerned to characterize the contents of experience as a robust interplay between perception, thought, and action, experiential content is conceptual insofar as its intentional objects are conceptually-laden empirical facts.
CHAPTER 1:

Dimensions of the Debate

1.1 Introduction

When we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch, what do we see, hear, smell, or touch? When we think, what do we think? When we act, what do we do? These are the questions that will concern us in this essay.

What connects these questions? Why ask them together? Each of these together—perception, thought, and action—constitute experience. This is to say: When we experience something, our experience of it can be cashed out in terms of what we perceive, think, and do. Ask a child, for example, what it was like to visit Disneyland, and she might tell you about seeing Mickey, about liking the teacup ride best, and how she might have dragged her parents on it one too many times. Ask an old hippie what was it like to attend Woodstock, and he might tell you about the way the Grateful Dead sounded, what he thought of the Sha-Na-Na fans, and what he was doing when Hendrix played the national anthem. If this is what it means to talk about experience in general, one can see each of the questions above as part of the broader question: When we experience, what do we experience?

What kind of question is this? It’s a question about the content of experience. Such a question is similar, in certain ways, to other questions having to do with content. When one asks what a novel is about or what the president said in last night’s address
these are also questions about content. What differentiates the central question of this essay from other questions about content is that we will here be concerned with the content of experience.

Of course, saying as much doesn’t get us very far. “Experience” is one of those terms that confuses philosophers and laymen alike. This isn’t due to a lack of use or of relevance but rather quite the opposite. We talk so often about experience—the very notion of experience is so deeply engrained into our everyday thinking—that we tend to lose track of it in much the same way that we might lose track of the glasses on our face. Sometimes the familiar is more obscure than the obscure itself. And so it is with experience.

Because of this, we can’t begin this essay the way so many other philosophical essays begin, with a nice definition of the thing to be discussed. Inasmuch as experience is so close to us as to be almost invisible, it simply wouldn’t be much help. The contours of experience can only be revealed through slow and careful analysis. The best I can do now is to repeat myself and say that experience is composed of perception, thought, and action; though why I say this—and the significance of saying as much—will have to wait until later.

On the other hand: We might as well state, in a bald-faced manner, the general perspective and thesis of this essay for those who might know these topics well enough to make sense of them without guidance. The style of argumentation in what follows is best characterized as transcendental in the Kantian sense; on my view, even granting that the contents of experience are so close to us as to be obscured thereby, sensitive phenomenological analysis—a particularly close form of attention paid to what it’s like to be
us—cannot fail to provide us with the truth about such matters. The task of this essay is to argue against a loose “school” of philosophers who are currently pushing for the inclusion of a “new” technical notion in the philosophy of mind and elsewhere, that of non-conceptual content. I argue from the results of phenomenological analyses to what I believe are insights into the preconditions of experience (with what makes experience possible). Finding no room for the nonconceptual in the sense advocated by the aforementioned school, I conclude that all experience (at least as we know it) is deeply, even necessarily, conceptual.

1.2 An Initial Characterization of Nonconceptual Content

The debate over nonconceptual content is one about the existence and role of nonconceptual content in experience. There are two main positions. The nonconceptualist is a proponent of the inclusion of the nonconceptual as a kind of mental content. The conceptualist argues against the inclusion of this kind of content, arguing instead that all mental content is conceptual. Since, as we’ve already stated, there’s little use in trying to formally define experience at this stage, the way we’ll enter into the debate over nonconceptual content is to consider what it is that nonconceptual content is supposed to be.

In a recent paper, one of the foremost nonconceptualists, José Luis Bermúdez, offers what I take to be a good, widely accepted characterization of nonconceptual content and the nonconceptualist’s motivation in positing it:

The general thought is that it is theoretically legitimate to refer to mental states which represent the world but which do not require the bearer of those mental states to possess the concepts required to specify the way in which they represent the world. These are states with nonconceptual content. A nonconceptual content can be attributed to a creature without
thereby attributing to that creature mastery of the concepts required to specify that content.¹

Four points concerning this characterization are in order:

(1) At issue here is what Bermúdez generically calls “mental states.” Philosophers and others have many classifications for phenomena that could be termed “mental states” in a generic sense. And we could wonder—particularly without the context in which this characterization is placed—which phenomena Bermúdez has in mind here. Is he talking about beliefs? Perceptions? Acts of will? Sensations? Hunger pangs? Lower back soreness? What?

An answer is provided by his talk of “representation.” Bermúdez here implicitly (and elsewhere explicitly) limits the range of the nonconceptual content debate to only those mental states that are representational, i.e., that somehow represent the world, or some state of affairs in it, to the subject. Without getting into Bermúdez’s specific reasons, one might offer as justification for this focusing of the issue the fact that, presumably, only representational mental states have content, and so only they can be conceptual or nonconceptual in the relevant sense. Indeed, we should probably say that the reason that representational mental states represent is precisely because they have content. But then if we put things this way, a question naturally arises as to which of the two—representational mental states or contentful mental states—is the more general. Does one encompass the other such that all mental states that can be classified as one be classified as the other but not vice versa? Or perhaps they are indistinguishable under such criterion, and all representational mental states are contentful and vice versa? Let’s

¹ Bermúdez 1995, 184.
leave this question to one side for the time being except to say the following: It seems to me that this question cannot be asked independently of some context in which it could be decided. As will become clear shortly, there are three contexts within which we will be working, and it’s quite likely that, upon consideration, each will have something slightly different to say in answer to this question.

(2) What makes content conceptual or nonconceptual according to Bermúdez? Bermúdez refers to mastery in the above definition because it is through mastery that a subject displays that she has a concept. But that is not the crux of it. Rather, for some, it is possession (or lack of possession) of the relevant concepts that matters. To see what this entails, imagine a theorist tasked with characterizing the contents of a subject’s mind. (That subject might be someone else or even himself and the theorist we can imagine to be a psychologist or even any old man-on-the-street wanting to know what’s going on in the subject’s mind.) Such a theorist is engaged in a certain kind of task, with its own unique rules and logic. Conceptual content is content the specification of which requires the theorizer to take into account which concepts the subject has or has mastery of. Non-conceptual content, obviously then, is content the specification of which does not require the theorizer to take into account which concepts the subject possesses.

Now, not all nonconceptualists agree that the relevant issue in determining whether or not content is conceptual is what concepts the subject possesses or has “mastery” of. Some (in fact most, I think) rather maintain that the important distinction is between those concepts of the subject’s which are, as we’ll put it, deployed in the having of the experience and which are not. To those who find this to be the important issue, it seems possible that there are situations where the subject has the relevant concepts that
could be put to use in the characterization of the content of their experience (as displayed by their mastery of them under certain circumstances) but, for whatever reason, they are not in fact being deployed during the actual having of that experience.\(^2\) The nonconceptualist position with respect to situations such as these is that, (1) they are possible (perhaps even commonplace) and (2) in such situations the contents of the experience are nonconceptual.

There is obviously a great deal of difference between these two ways of putting the nonconceptualist position, and it’s helpful to be clear from the start which of these one is dealing with when one discusses nonconceptual content. Let me state explicitly now, then, that it is the latter version of nonconceptualism that I will be interested in here. This is because, first, I think it’s a more interesting question but also, second, because it is the more encompassing of the two. Obviously, if one lacks a concept one cannot deploy it in experience, and so to pass, as it were, the second test one needs to have passed the first. That said, unless otherwise explicitly stated, we’ll be considering questions of deployment over questions of mere possession or mastery when thinking about nonconceptualist arguments.

(3) Perhaps the most difficult question taken up in this study is, What are concepts? It’s hardly productive to ask whether or not a subject deploys a certain concept if one is confused about what concepts are. On the other hand, no one, I think many would agree, has ever given a satisfactory general characterization of concepts. Partly this is be-

\(^2\) There are other terms that we could use instead of “deployed”: put to use, engaged, accessed, brought to mind, etc. But since one of our tasks will be to spell out what deployment amounts to, it seems of little consequence which term we pick so long as it’s recognized to be technical.
cause the notion of a concept (note that I shy away from saying “the concept of a concept”!) is one of the most basic tools in the philosophical toolbox. I don’t believe it’d be going too far out on a limb to say that there is hardly a philosopher in the modern era that hasn’t used the term “concept” to express ideas central to their thinking. Trying to find a definition that could capture all of these uses strikes me as impossible. But even if one chose to ignore most these uses, there are a near uncountable number of current uses spread across different disciplines that it’d be hard to not contend with, even granting a restriction on those disciplines that claim to say something about the human mind. The best we can do, it seems to me, is to offer an internally coherent picture of concepts along something like a Wittgensteinian family-semblance model. And even then it’s not, I think, advisable to start with such a task. I therefore beg the reader’s patience in this regard, and pledge that a notion of concepts will gradually emerge out of the discussion that, it is hoped, will satisfy all reasonable demands on a project such as this one. It is inasmuch as we will focus on questions of concept deployment that a suitable, if admittedly ad hoc, concept of a concept will arise.³

(4) I cannot overstate the importance of the fact that in talking about the possibility and place of nonconceptual content we are concerned first and foremost with characterizations of the content of experience. Nonconceptual content, it must be admitted, is at this stage still a theoretical entity. Neither philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, laymen, or anyone else has observed content that is nonconceptual.

³ If you really can’t wait for a definition of concepts, here’s the definition that I offer in §4.3 below: “A concept is that which (other than that provided by our sensible faculties) allows a cognitive creature to be tuned to the facticity [i.e., that there are states of affairs] of the world.”
(Indeed, it isn’t even clear what it would mean to observe content, nonconceptual or otherwise.) As a result, when it comes to nonconceptual content, *everyone* is arguing in what I identified earlier as a transcendental manner. The question is whether or not the notion of nonconceptual content is necessary, or even helpful, in making sense of experience. The proponent of nonconceptual content finds it necessary (or perhaps just helpful) to specify the contents of experience in ways that are not restricted by what concepts the subject (i.e., the one the contents of experience of which we are concerned with) possesses or makes use of.

The proponents of nonconceptual content are sometimes more and sometimes less explicit about this. Bermúdez, to his credit, is very explicit about it (both in his Bermúdez 1995 and in his other work on this issue). In a piece meant to serve as a general introduction to the debate, Bermúdez recognizes the place that characterizations play in this debate by claiming that nonconceptualists are arguing for the abandonment of what he calls “The Conceptual Constraint” in their characterizations of mental states. We’ll examine the conceptual constraint in more detail later in this chapter of this chapter. For now I want to emphasize what I’ll call the *pragmatic nature* of the nonconceptualist argument for the existence and role of nonconceptual content that is revealed by focusing on characterizations in this way. It would be all too easy for those unfamiliar with this debate to think it a matter of pure ontology, that is, just a question of what there is to be found in the mind. The central, and ineliminable place of characterizations in this debate means that the question does not simply come down to empirical study. It simply cannot be de-

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4 Bermúdez 2003.
cided by observation. It’s also, perhaps even primarily, a question of what works best in our characterizations of mental content—a question of what we decide about the nature of the mind. This is what I mean by saying that this debate has a pragmatic element.

Bermúdez is quite cognizant of this. He says,

> the basic idea of nonconceptual content provides an exciting tool for tackling a range of problems in the philosophy of mind and cognition. Allowing that a creature’s representational capacities can outstrip its conceptual capacities makes it possible for philosophers and cognitive scientists to study aspects of cognition and behavior that remain outside the scope of more traditional approaches—from subpersonal computational mechanisms to the psychological states of non-human animals and human infants to the nature of perceptual experience.⁵

For Bermúdez, nonconceptual content is “an exciting tool,” something that, it is clear, he believes we should “allow” into our characterizations of the content of a creature’s experience. Bermúdez would not be talking in this way if it were simply a matter or what is—a matter of ontology. We’ll come back to this point at various times in what follows, for I think much of the confusion in this debate is a result of a misunderstanding of this basic point.

### 1.3 Placing the Dialectic

On some accounts, the notion of nonconceptual content is relatively recent. According to them, so called “traditional approaches” to understanding the mind—most of them deriving from a Cartesian paradigm—worked, in their way, to help theorists specify

⁻⁵ Bermúdez 2003, §6, emphasis mine.
the contents of their and other minds. But such views had their problems; they failed in certain respects. And what they could not explain led to puzzlement. The notion of nonconceptual content, should we choose to make room for it, provides a solution to some of these puzzles.

Such an understanding of the debate makes the nonconceptualist something of a radical figure, and casts the conceptualist in the role of spoiler. The conceptualist seeks to wrench a new and exciting tool out of the hands of the theorist.

There’s perhaps little value in arguing against such a picture; after all, who really cares which side gets cast as the bad guy in an academic debate such as this? One rather hopes we can overcome rhetoric in favor of sound argument. So let it stand; indeed, let’s take it seriously.

Let’s ask: What argument can a traditionalist provide to discourage a self-styled radical from adopting a new, exciting tool?

There seem to be two general lines of argument one could provide. Sometimes a tool is more trouble than it’s worth. We’ve probably all been suckered into buying a time-saving kitchen gadget that is so hard to clean that we actually spend more time in the kitchen than we would have otherwise. Perhaps nonconceptual content is like this, and the inclusion of this notion into our theorizing about the contents of the mind would on balance cause more harm than good. Sometimes, though, it isn’t so much that the tool is trouble but rather that the very task for which the tool was devised is unnecessary. No

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6 For instance, Bermúdez associates conceptualism with the “widespread rejection of the traditional empiricist distinction between sensation and belief” (1995, 184).

7 These puzzles include: animal thought, infant thought, other mind problems, and certain problems about perception and action that we will consider in what follows.
one would want a better mousetrap if we weren’t interested in catching mice. This, as we will see, is what I think we ought to say about many of the so-called “problems” that the nonconceptualist is trying to resolve. It isn’t that we need more or better tools with which to characterize the contents of experience. Rather, we need to rethink what it is to characterize such contents from the ground up.

That said, though it hardly matters, it’s hard for me to take seriously the story that casts the nonconceptualist as the cutting-edge radical and the conceptual as the staid traditionalist. While the conceptualist does indeed want to deny the nonconceptualist their use of the notion of nonconceptual content, they do so as part of a broader re-imagining of the preconditions of experience itself, not because they are trying to patch up holes left by traditional accounts.

1.4 The Conceptual Constraint

What makes nonconceptual content unique, if it exists, is that it can be specified free from a certain kind of constraint that, following Bermúdez, we’ll call “the conceptual constraint.” The conceptual constraint calls upon the theorizer to do two things. To

(1) characterize the contents of experience in ways that are sensitive to how the subject in question actually experiences the world

by endeavoring to

(2) make use only of concepts that the subject in fact deploys in an experience.
It is the rejection of (2) that defines the nonconceptualist position. That is to say, both conceptualists and nonconceptualists are going to accept (1), and the debate comes down to what to say about (1). It’s instructive to see why.

It’s perfectly possible to reject (1)—the injunction to characterize the contents of the experience of a subject in a way which is sensitive to how that subject actually experiences the world—given a certain sort of project. Something like such a project is undertaken, e.g., when one makes no effort to interpret another’s words charitably, or when one simply disregards what one knows to be the likely content of a subject’s mind as part of an effort to mislead another. For instance, if a child intends to lie about what happened on the playground (so as to put the blame for an accident on another child, say), he may characterize the beliefs and intentions of that other child in whatever way will get him out of trouble, regardless of what he himself actually believes the other child’s’ mental state to have been. Less dramatically, people very often find reason to be less than careful in their characterization of another’s thoughts or actions even if they would never dream of actually lying about it. It might make me feel better about myself if I believe that they guy I yelled at out of my car window today was trying to cut to me off rather than just not paying attention to where he was going.

But then people in situations such as these are obviously no longer engaged in the task that interests us here, that of characterizing the contents of a subject’s experience. At best, they would be interested in appearing to characterize such contents. This suggests that there is little, if any, wiggle room between the injunction laid out in (1) and the overarching task that brings together the players in the nonconceptual content debate.
But even granting agreement between the two sides on this point, there are other disagreements concerning the conceptual constraint that need to be worked out. Consider how Bermúdez puts the second part of the conceptual constraint, (2) above:

Specifications of the content of a sentence or propositional attitude state must not employ concepts that are not possessed by the utterer or thinker.  

As I see it, this runs together many questions that should be kept separate. I have two main objections. My first objection is that it seems to allow for treating linguistic content and mental content at the same time. Put another way, it implies that the questions that lead one to adopt or reject a notion of nonconceptual content concern both what we say and what we experience. This is a big mistake (as I will argue in the next section). My second objection is that it implicitly endorses treating all mental content as propositional. This, too, is a mistake, at least if we assume a certain widespread understanding of propositions (as I’ll show in §1.6). Though I want to endorse, at this early stage, Bermúdez’s characterization of the nonconceptualist as someone who rejects the conceptual constraint, I can only do so given certain corrections in what I think of as lapses in philosophical clarity. Let’s turn to that task now.

1.5 The Varieties of Content

I started this essay by asking: When we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch, what do we see, hear, smell, or touch? When we think, what do we think? When we act, what do we do? And I took these questions to compromise the central question in debate over nonconceptual content: What is the content of experience? I did this because when we in

8 Bermúdez 2003, §1.
fact characterize the contents of experience we move with ease between each of these elements. We explain what it was like to taste by discussing what we think. We describe what we did in terms of what we saw, and vice versa. This amounts to a kind of holism with respect to the contents of experience, a holism that implies that an account of the contents of experience cannot be given which does not encompass the contents of each of these central elements.\(^9\)

Would I want to say this about all contents? Is there a holism in this sense which would necessarily tie together analyses of experiential content with the contents of things like books and paintings, letters and speeches? I wouldn’t want to rule it out. But it wouldn’t be a holism that arises as a result of the nature of experience, and that’s the important point. Perhaps it would result from trying to make sense of the contents of a Hegelian spirit; perhaps political discourse can only be interpreted in relation to the totality of the human predicament. My project makes no such claims. I therefore make no claims about the extent to which a content holism must be maintained beyond that required by the nature of experience.

In particular, I think it worth stressing that I will not be treating the contents of experience as tied up in any particular way with the contents of language (broadly conceived to include the contents of novels, speeches, or even things like stop signs). I am not unique in drawing a sharp distinction here given my purposes. In his Origins of Ana-

\(^9\) This kind of holism is importantly different from conceptual holism, which I discuss in §3.5 below, which is the view that concepts are non-atomistic entities whose “meaning” (in a loose sense) is only definable relative to a whole framework of concepts (or a “conceptual framework”). In §3.5 I put this point in terms of concept acquisition and possession.
**lytic Philosophy**, Michael Dummett characterizes Gareth Evans as the first post-Analytic philosopher because he inverts the paradigm, characteristic of the philosophy of Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, that puts the analysis of language at the heart of an analysis of thought. For the Analytic philosopher in Dummett’s sense, in order to characterize the contents of a subject’s mind, one must have already characterized the contents of their language (or linguistic acts). What Evans does that is so remarkable is to analyze the content of mental demonstratives, the *thoses* and the *thats* that, in thought, refer to objects, while leaving the content of what is *said* to the side. I follow Evans in holding that an analysis of thought can be run independently of an analysis of language.11

Indeed, I think this is what a conceptualist would have to say. If it were otherwise, nonconceptual content would surely need to be posited. Why? Because it is possible to say all sorts of things that one cannot think, as Evans also stressed. He said, “we are all familiar with cases in which, through carelessness or ignorance of the language, the speaker selects words which are unsuitable to his thoughts.”12 In cases of ignorance in particular, if one were to hold that an analysis of mental content can be accomplished through an analysis of linguistic content, then one would be attributing mental content (saying that the subject thinks such-and-such) without regard for how the subject thinks (i.e., because they say such-and-such).

If this is ok in the book of the philosopher of language, perhaps there is room for a notion of nonconceptual content in the analysis of linguistic content. I should think that

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10 Dummett 1993.
11 For more on how Evans conceives of the relationship between linguistic and mental content, see in particular §§3.2, 3.3, and 6.4 of his 1982.
this would have to do with the relationship between linguistic and mental content. But this question is outside the scope of this essay, as are, again, questions about the preconditions on language use. We will be concerned only with the contents and preconditions of experience.

1.6 The Varieties of Mental Content

Even granting a holism concerning the different elements of mental content we need to make room for the possibility that these elements could differ in respect to the nature of their contents from one another. This is a concern because much of the literature on mental content assumes what I’ll here call (for lack of a better term) propositionalism. As I’ll use this term, propositionalism with respect to mental content is the view that all mental content can be cashed out in terms of abstract sentence-like structures that are “grasped” in thought and “expressed” in utterances. According to the view I have in mind, to believe that X is to “entertain,” through a kind of appreciative grasping, that a certain sentence, X, is true; to desire that X is to want to see a certain sentence X be true, in what we might think of as a certain kind of hopeful grasping; to fear that X is to want that a certain sentence X to not be true in a kind of disdainful grasping; and so on. Propositionalism, then, can be understood as the combination of two distinct views: (1) that mental contents are representations; and (2) that such represents either are or can be modeled on sentences. In other words, propositionalism is the combination of representationalism and what we can call sententialism.

In my view, not only is propositionalism wholly insufficient as an approach to characterizing linguistic content, it’s not at all clear why we should be impressed with
how it handles mental content to the point that we answer questions about the existence and nature of nonconceptual content based on it. Here’s one way to show the limitations of propositionalism in our thinking about linguistic content. (Since the notion of a proposition is very widely used in philosophy, however, I’ll stick to criticizing representation- alism and sententialism to avoid confusion.)

Some philosophers of language will tell you that there is no such thing as non-linguistic assertion, where by “linguistic” they seem to mean “of or relating to the utter-ance.” On their view, it is quite a different matter to say something to someone, a sentence of English, say, than to “communicate” to them the same thing by means not as obviously uttered. Say that I pass someone on a hike down a mountain. They ask me, “Do you know where the nearest place to get some fresh water is?” and I say, pointing down a winding path, “There’s a spring right over there.” This is a clear-cut case of linguistic communication by way of an act of assertion. Had I merely set out a sign with some kind of symbol for “water” on it—blue wavy lines, for instance—and an arrow pointing down that same path, this would not have been an instance of linguistic communication for the sententialist. “What sentence was expressed?” they will say. “If we cannot identify one and call it ‘the sentence expressed,’ because there are many different sentences that one could identify as being ‘the content,’ then this cannot have been a linguistic act.”

This, I think, is precisely the wrong way to look at things. Knowing as I do the situation—that thirsty hikers often cross this path, that they will be on the lookout for fresh water sources, that blue wavy lines are, to people like me, reminiscent of water, that

13 E.g., Rescorla 2005.
arrows are taken, by people like me, to act as pointers to things that might interested them, etc.—my setting out the sign was just as much a way of communicating with my fellows as actually producing sounds with my larynx. The anti-propositionalist, in my sense, denies that there is any single abstract sentence-like structure that is the content of my sign, but yet still maintains that there was meaningful, contentful communication between us. The content of the sign is a function of the situation and the expectations of the people involved in it, yes, but I said something to that thirsty hiker.

Now, I want to say something similar about mental content. It may appear plausible that mental contents could be characterized in propositionalist terms. We very often characterize the contents of our own thought by uttering sentences. “I was thinking that I don’t much care for this steak.” or “I was wondering what time the movie starts” are common ways of saying what we think. Would it be wrong, however, to simply point to an object in answer to the question “What are you thinking?” We might want to say yes, in the sense that many would reply to this “answer” with something like “What are you thinking about it?” Presumably the questioner wants to hear something like “that we like the object,” or “were wondering where it came from,” or “were curious how it was made,” etc. But this might simply be an injunction for more a more detailed characterization of our thought and not, more restrictively, the only way to a provide a characterization as such. The questioner, that is, isn’t asking about what sentence or sentences the

14 There are many more examples of the inadequacy of propositionalism as an account of linguistic content. Propositionalists have a hard time accounting for interrogatives, imperatives, exclamations, etc., which have led at various times to their simply calling them off limits to the theorizer of meaning. But can we really believe that my saying “Ouch!” real loud does not mean anything to those who hear me holler it just because there is no proposition that we can formulate which “adequately” captures its content? This seems absurd, and would surely be rejected by everyone but a theory-minded philosopher.
thinker has in mind, but rather asking what about the object it is that is so interesting. If this is right, the sententialist cannot appeal to such situations as an argument for their view.

But even if thought contents can or must always be expressed as sentences—and it might very well be so—I see no plausible reason to suppose that the contents of perceptions and actions must be as well. Surely it is perfectly reasonable and exhaustive to answer a question such as “What are you looking at?” by pointing to an object that the questioner can see as well. “What am I looking at? That!” “I know, but what are you looking at about it” just doesn’t seem to make any sense here. To put it another way, when it comes to perceptual contents, objects themselves can be contents.

As to the contents of actions, few in fact recognize that actions have contents in the sense that I will maintain here. I attribute this principally to the predominance of sententialist thinking in contemporary philosophy. But the conclusion that actions have content can be secured from the fact that it makes sense to ask what one is doing when one acts, or what one did (or didn’t do) when one acted. Think of an analogy. Perhaps it does make sense to ask what the cricket’s chirps mean. But it will only do so when we can say something about how those chirps relate to the “thought” and “perceptions” of the cricket. Since crickets seem to lack the desire to see a movie, it makes no sense to say that their chirps mean “Let’s go see a movie.” In a similar vein, when we try and determine the scope of responsibility for an action we do so by determining the content of the thought and perceptions of the subject. I want to claim that not only do we recognize ac-
tions as having contents, but also that their contents are characterized in a holistic fashion with the rest of the contents of experience.\(^{15}\)

That said, can the contents of action be characterized as sentences? Studies of expert behavior reveal that they cannot. An expert cyclist, say, would be hard-pressed to compile a list of sentences characterizing how, precisely, they take a tight turn at 50 mph without skidding off the road. Indeed, the physics of the thing may be so complicated that no one could characterize it in such terms. Perhaps complex mathematical or computer models would have to be used. But this does not show that actions (even expert actions) do not have content. It only shows that they do not have contents that could be characterized as sentences. That is, the cyclist is responding to particular features of the road given their circumstances; they see the turn as something to be taken aggressively with a lean, or as something to be approached with caution by breaking before it, etc. How much of a lean to make, how much pressure to apply to the brake, these are things which the subject conceives in a generic sense trusting (though not explicitly) the body's practiced subpersonal systems to respond in the appropriate way. I take it this is not captured sententially inasmuch as the specific features of the road combined with the physical facts having to do with the way the bike handles under different approaches to the turn are included in the content itself. A sentence referring to those features and facts is not the same thing.\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Again (see footnote 8 above) this holism is different than conceptual holism and concerns the contentfulness of what I think of as the triumvirate of action, thought, and perception.

\(^{16}\) The philosopher who has had the most say about what expert behavior implies about the mind and experience is Hubert Dreyfus. See Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1985, Dreyfus 1991, Dreyfus 1992, and Dreyfus 2005.
We should also note that in denying propositionalism in my sense I am cutting myself off from what might look to others to be an attractive argument for conceptualism. If it really were the case that all mental contents could be captured in terms of propositions, then it seems that conceptualism would simply fall out if, as some people maintain, concepts are the constituents of propositions, then grasping a proposition would of necessity be, and only be, grasping collections of concepts arranged in various ways.17 This suggests that views that equate concepts with words are varieties of sententialism, which is what I will argue in chapter 4.

Let me briefly say something to those who might object to my use of the notion of a proposition here. There are many different notions of a proposition in philosophy, and it would be misleading if I were to imply that the notion of a proposition is hopeless in characterizing the contents of experience. This is why I expressed, at the start at this section, some unhappiness with the term “propositionalism” and then broke that into what I take to be its two parts: representationalism and sententialism. The major philosopher with whom my use of the term “proposition” most closely aligns is probably Frege,18 but Bertrand Russell has a notion of propositions that might prove more palatable to me.19 He believed that physical objects were elements of propositions, which would appear to coincide with what I said about the contents of perceptions above. A quite different view takes a proposition to be a set of possible worlds, and surely a set of possible worlds,

17 Interestingly, Kent Bach (Bach 1999) reads Bermúdez as holding the view that concepts are the constituents of concepts. I’m not so sure about this, but if this were the case that would perhaps explain why he is so opposed to the idea that experience can be characterized in conceptualist terms.
18 See in particular his essay “Der Gedanke” (Frege 1918) which outlines his views on how thoughts grasp abstracta.
19 I’m here referring to Russell’s early (pre-1905) view on propositions as stated in, e.g., Russell 1903.
though it has properties of abstracta for us, does not have a sentence-like structure. If I had the time and thought it’d help, I’d go into more depth on the topic of propositions. As it stands, since I’m not going to be making use of that notion in what follows, it seems to me that the best approach is to admit that there may very well be some notion of a proposition which would fit nicely with what I here provisionally conclude about the contents of experience and leave it at that.

1.7 The Conceptual Constraint Reformulated

Having registered these reservations and clarifications, what is needed is a reformulated conceptual constraint, one that deals specifically with mental content (and thus leaves linguistic content to one side) and that recognizes that mental content comes in varieties. I suggest the following:

**Conceptual Constraint (CC):** Specifications of mental content must not employ concepts that are not deployed by the subject in a given experience.

This formulation drops talk of linguistic content all together and it recognizes the diversity of mental content by talking about a subject of experience which can be understood in general terms as a thinker, perceiver, and actor in the world. But, importantly, it still captures the two thoughts that form the conceptual constraint: that we should (1) characterize the contents of experience in ways that respect the way a subject actually experiences the world by (2) appealing only to the concepts which they in fact do deploy in a given experience. For future convenience in cases where we want to talk about one or
another of these elements specifically, I’ll call these CC1 and CC2, respectively. I’ll hereafter refer to them as the intuitions underlying the CC as well, since the thought is that it is because we have such intuitions that we, as theorists, choose to constrain ourselves in such a way when we are engaged in projects of characterizing a the contents of a subject’s experience. From here on, when we talk about the conceptual constraint (the CC) we will be talking about the above characterization.

1.8 Three Areas of Puzzlement

So far I’ve been concerned to do two things: (1) Place the debate over nonconceptual content into the context of a few influential strands of thought about linguistic content, mental content, and their relation to each other, in the hopes that the reader may start to get a sense of what is at issue. (2) Sketch in broad terms what my approach to mental content is and how it differs from other approaches on offer, both other conceptualist positions as well as nonconceptualist ones. Later chapters will continue these efforts, so I beg the reader’s patience if (as is to be expected) what I’ve said so has raised more questions than it has answered.

That said, I’d like to take the rest of this chapter to mention a few avenues of thought that I am not going to concern myself with in the rest of this essay. I do this both as a way to limit the scope of my later discussions, but also as a way of justifying my doing so.
Recall that Bermúdez sees the notion of nonconceptual content to be “an exciting tool for tackling a range of problems in the philosophy of mind and cognition.” Inasmuch as one holds to this view, any thorough account of the nonconceptualist position should include detailed discussions of the range of these problems. I cannot hope to undertake a project of this scope, however. But I can suggest why I think any damage to my position growing out of work in these areas should be minimal.

According to Bermúdez, there are three areas where the notion of nonconceptual content looks like an exciting tool for the theorist of mental content:

(1) In psychological explanations of non- and pre-linguistic creatures.

(2) In theories incorporating sub-personal mental states.

(3) In theories of sense perception.

It is 3, theories of sense perception, that will most concern us in this essay. This is not because perception is my main explanatory target; I rather seek an account of the contents of experience of which perception is only one element. This seems to me obviously so, but Bermúdez and many others would resist here. Many believe that the contents of perception can be characterized independently of the contents of thought and action, effectively denying the holistic nature of experience. I’ve already said why I think this is a mistake. And I’ll spend more time on it in a later chapter. So let’s set it aside for now and

21 I follow Bermúdez here who distinguishes between these “three different explanatory projects” in his 2003, §3.
use the rest of this chapter to discuss my reasons for ignoring the experiences of non- and pre-linguistic creatures as well as the contents of so-called non- and sub-personal computational states.

1.9 The Non- and Pre-Linguistic

Animal cognition is one of the real hard problems of the philosophy of mind. First off, it’s not at all clear how we should begin. We very often attribute mental states to animals based on their behavior alone; nothing could be more obvious that *the dog wants the bone* when he’s licking his chops to get it. But then we also think that there are certain things that the dog cannot think, thoughts about how the world might end or about whether or not to invest more in their 401k program. It seems impossible to deny that there are whole spheres of thought that are off-limits to them not because of their simple-mindedness, and certainly not for lack of sufficiently sensitive sensible faculties, but precisely because they lack the concepts that anyone who can think within such spheres possess. The hard problem of characterizing a non-linguistic creature’s thought is mainly due, I think, to the fact that so much of our thought is tied to language (and in particular with all that we can do with a shared language).

Given what I’ve said about separating linguistic from mental content, then, one might think that I’d leave a place to discuss animal thought in what follows. That’s not the case. There are a number of reasons for this. For one thing, much of the evidence that I will bring to bear on the questions to follow is of the phenomenological variety. But as has long been recognized, we don’t know what it’s like to have the experiences of ani-
mals.  We can speculate, and in some cases we can guess what it must be like given our own experience. But such speculations and guess lie outside the scope of this essay.

So I am going to set aside the issue of psychological explanations of nonlinguistic creatures in what follows. My concern will be with how we characterize human experience, with what it’s like to be us, not them.

Pre-linguistic, or infant, experience is also a difficult problem for the philosophy of mind, one is that is perhaps not as easy to set aside. Why? Because it forces one to engage with questions concerning the development of fully human experience which many find (a) more tractable than the questions of animal experience as well as (b) more obviously relevant to the question of how to understand human experience.

This is, on the face of it, bad for the conceptualist. Many hear the conceptualist position as denying thought (and thus experience) to infants. Others maintain that it raises the bar on thought (or experience) so high that it makes all developmental stories impossible. I don’t think either of these things is true. We should not forget that we are talking about the contents of experience. Our project—and it is the project of the nonconceptualists as well, remember—is to understand what it is to characterize experience. It is not an ontological project, to say what experience is. Given this, there seems to be no reason to think that we will necessarily learn more about what it is to experience the world by examining the experiences of infants.

On top of this, whatever developmental stories that need to be told about how infant experience becomes the experience of an adult, it is not at all clear how the ontoge-

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22 Most famously on this topic, see Nagel 1974.
netic accounts that the psychologist is concerned to give are to be related to the semantic (philosophy of content) account that will be developed here. As will become clear in chapter 4, there are social externalist conditions on experience that are normative. As a result, the developmental account preferred by the theorist of content includes a story about how it is that one is recognized as a subject of experience in the first place.

Though these are interesting questions, addressing them here would make for a monstrous project indeed. As a result, I will be talking about human adult experience only.

1.10 Sub-Personal Mental States

There’s one last restriction I will make on the scope of this discussion. Bermúdez and others have suggested that nonconceptual content needs to be posited in order to account for phenomena at the sub-personal level. Such phenomena are studied principally by cognitive scientists, psychologists, and neuroscientists, but are often brought into philosophical discussions as well. Those that have talked about cognition as information processing fall into this class, many inspired by the work on perception by David Marr or the work on information and knowledge done by Fred Dretske.

One question we should ask such theorists concerns the extent to which the sub-personal phenomena are contentful. By sub-personal here we mean, literally, beneath the level of the person or personal awareness. When I am looking at a scene before me, a La

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23 Bermúdez 1995.
24 Marr 1982.
Jolla Cove sunset, say, my sense organs and brain are working hard for me. It is, in a sense, they that allow me to see the sunset. Two questions: First, do we need to posit content—or representation—here to account for the work they do? And, second, is the work they are doing, or the content they make use of in the doing of it, any part of my experience of the sunset? Only if we can yes to each of these questions, I think, will the results of such studies matter for the theorist of the content of experience.

In response to the first question, I am fully willing to accept that sub-personal processes make use of contentful representations. Marr, for instance, appeals to what he calls “sketches” in accounting for how variations in illumination (something like a bare scene of differently shaded color patches) come to be perceived as objects in space. First a “primal” sketch is created wherein the salient features of the scene are drawn. The edges of objects; the regions of shadow and light. Then is created a 2.5-D sketch where, for instance, the recognized (previously sketched) objects receive texture. Finally, a 3-D sketch is completed which completes the perceived scene. Theorists have wondered whether or not it would be appropriate to call these sketches representations of the scene, i.e., whether or not these sketches have content. Bermúdez argues (in his 1995) that although they do not meet the propositionalist notion of what content is, they should be counted as content all the same since, following Peacocke26 they clearly have “correctness conditions.” Mistakes could be made in the creation of any of Marr’s sketches. If an area of low illumination is sketched to be a shadow, the resulting scene will not accu-

rately represent the world. For Peacocke, correctness conditions such as these are the sole marker of contentfullness.

Now I am not going to argue this point, particular given what I’ve already said above about the varieties of content. What’s less clear is that this should be called mental content or experiential content. Concerning the former, it is perhaps an uphill battle to deny that such content is mental; after all, where else is this information processing going on if not in the mind? But I doubt if in the final analysis we want to use location as a determination of the type of content. Should we restrict the scope of linguistic content to all and only the noises made by the larynx of a speaker? It just seems silly. What we need is a principled way to demarcate mental content from other types of content, which, sadly, I must admit to lacking.

Concerning the latter question, however, I think it’s clear that sub-personal content (like Marr’s sketches) have no right to be called experiential. When all goes well with my visual processing system I perceive the scene before me and the series of sketches that make possible my seeing it are transparent to me. Indeed, even when all does not go well, I do not experience my misperception as a mistake in one of my sub-personal sketches but as lack of attentiveness on my part. This is perhaps because in order for my experience to be mine it must be, in Kantian terms, “synthesized” into single whole.27 Only then can the distinct elements provided by the various sub-personal information processing systems play their role in allowing the subject to perceive a single,

27 Kant 1781/1787. See A77/B103.
continuous world. Sub-personal content may very well be content, but it isn’t clear that experiential content could be anything other personal.

This is all too quick, I fear, but it seems to me that inasmuch as our purpose is to given an account of the contents of experience, we can safely ignore the content of sub-personal systems. Whether or not sub-personal content is nonconceptual is not our concern. For this reason, I can here say that I will be concerned with giving an account only of personal human adult mental content in what follows.

1.11 Thesis and Outline of the Project

Here is the thesis that I wish to defend in this essay: All experiential content is conceptual inasmuch as experience is of a world that is permeated with the conceptual. Because our experience is not built out of smaller, context-free parts that can be experienced on their own, the contents of experience must be characterized in ways which take that context into account. And inasmuch as such contexts are properly conceptual, our experience is conceptual as well.

My argument for this thesis is as follows: chapter 2 is a targeted discussion and defusing of what I think are the most influential pro-nonconceptual content arguments. Chapter 3 argues for what I call a "robust" notion of experience by showing that the varieties of less robust notions are fatally problematic. In chapter 4, I develop the robust notion of the experience that I say we need in chapter 3, as well as argue that holding it implies the conceptuality thesis. And chapter 5 is an objections and replies chapter.

1.12 Conclusion
Four things were done in this chapter. First, we considered the lay of the land generally. Bermúdez was our central figure here, and his idea that nonconceptual content is an exciting tool for the theorist trying to characterize the contents of experience guided our discussion. Second, I set some boundaries on the debate that I will enforce as we go along. I argued that we need to distinguish between mental and linguistic content as well as denied that all mental content must be understood in propositionalist terms. I also raised the issues of animal, infant, and subpersonal mental states only to set them aside. Third, briefly and in the previous section, I announced the overall thesis of my essay and, fourth, I indicated the outline of the argument and how it plays out in the chapters that follow.

That said, let’s turn to a consideration of the case for conceptualism.
CHAPTER 2:
Pro-NCC Arguments Considered and Defused

2.1 Introduction

Nonconceptualists and conceptualists alike are driven by one of two types of considerations: ontological and phenomenological. “Naturalism” about the mind—in the form of a vague set of sometimes unspecified and/or undefended ontological commitments assumed to be consistent with the current best science—drives many views which do little more than define nonconceptual content into existence. And the current popularity in mainstream analytic philosophy of mind of talk of “what-it’s-like to be me”—or a bat, or a brain in a vat, or a color-blind neuroscientist, etc.¹—has, for better or for worse, brought phenomenological analyses to the philosophical masses.

These two approaches set up tensions which control the direction of the debate over the notion of nonconceptual content. Although I think that ultimately we need to find a way to resolve these tensions, my approach here will be to argue that broadly phenomenological considerations trump the transparently theory-driven ontological ones. Why? It is precisely because everyone is holding on to their mental ontologies that the debate over the notion of nonconceptual content is largely in stalemate. Not only that, but

since we presumably have access to the “phenomenological facts”\(^2\) (whereas the ontological facts are elusive) shifting the debate in this direction when we can makes it more tractable. Finding, then, that someone’s argument against conceptualism only goes through if one has at some earlier point accepted their theoretical ontology of the mind provides us (or at least me) with reason to resist that argument.

That said, our mantra from here on out will be: *To the phenomena be true*. Any ontological commitments that we have must be consistent with our best phenomenology of experience.

### 2.2 Four Reasons forPositing Nonconceptual Content

We can identify four main lines of argument that have been persuasive in attracting adherents to nonconceptualism about experiential content.\(^3\) They are:

1. The a-logical nature of experience
2. The analog nature of experience
3. The fineness of grain of experience
4. The unit-free nature of experience

We’ll discuss and respond to each of these lines of argument in this chapter, but let me briefly characterize them and the challenge they present to the conceptualist position.

\(^2\) …as even the most committed phenomenologist calls the fruit of their turn towards the phenomena.

\(^3\) The identification of four types of reasons is in part derived from Bermúdez who offers his own list of three reasons in our thinking about perceptual experience to be nonconceptualists. (See Bermúdez 2003, §3.1)
(1) To say that experience is a-logical is to say that it transcends (or otherwise avoids the grasp of) logic. If we think that the conceptual is by definition logical, then experience must be nonconceptual.

(2) To say that experience is analog is to say that it encodes more information than is needed or used in the processing of that information in the other cognitive systems that make use of experience as an input. If we think of the conceptual as the digitizing of the analog signal of experience, then the contents of experience would by definition be nonconceptual while the contents of thought (belief, desire, etc.) would be conceptual.\(^4\)

(3) To say that experience is fine-grained is to say that it has a fineness of detail that transcends our ability to describe it. If the conceptual is identical to the describable, then the contents of experience are nonconceptual.

(4) To say that experience is unit-free is to say that it should not be characterized through the use of units of measurement such as feet, pounds, and quarts. But inasmuch as the conceptualist is forced to use such characterizations the contents of experience must be nonconceptual.

Let’s take these in turn.

2.3 The A-Logical Nature of Perception

\(^4\) There is another sense of “analog” that I am not using here, but that we should mention to avoid confusion. Analog sometimes mean to share a structure with something else, and philosophers of science who talk about models have distinguished between (a) analog models of something which model in virtue of sharing a structure and (b) non-analog models which do not. A model airplane is an analog model of an airplane, for instance, in virtue of sharing basic structural features with the airplane it models whereas a flowchart meant to model, say, rush hour traffic might itself have none of the features of ruch hour traffic, and so would not be an analog model in this sense.
Arguments from the a-logical nature of perception start from seemingly non-ideological considerations of the phenomenology of a set of strange and very robust visual illusions. What proponents of nonconceptual content find there among the phenomenological facts, however, has ontological consequences. They claim to have found content that is beyond conceptual representation inasmuch as it stands outside the bounds of logic.

Though there are many visual illusions which have been discussed as being a-logical, the philosophical literature on this point has clumped around what vision scientists are calling “The Motion Aftereffect” or more popularly “The Waterfall Illusion.” The waterfall illusion has a long history, dating back all the way to Aristotle who considered it in a treatise on dreams. More recent discussion is well-represented in (Mather, Verstraten, and Anstis 1998). This book is a good source of psychological and vision science analyses of the MAE effect. But Tim Crane’s influential Analysis paper of 1988, “The Waterfall Illusion,” has become the touchstone for philosophical discussion.

Here’s how Crane characterizes the MAE experience.

If you stare for a period of time at a scene which contains movement in one direction, and then turn your attention to an object in a scene which contains no movement, this object will appear to move in the opposite direction to that of the original movement. The effect can be easily achieved by attaching a piece of paper with a spiral drawn on it to the spinning turntable of a record player, and then turning the turntable off while continuing to look at the spiral…But the illusion of movement can also occur when looking at a waterfall, for instance, and turning one’s attention away from the waterfall to a stationary object such as a stone; hence its name—the “Waterfall Illusion.”

5 For a very nice historical discussion, see Wade and Verstraten 1998.
6 Crane 1988a.
7 See also the reply from Mellor 1988, the subsequent response from Crane 1988b, along with the earlier Frisby 1979, Crane’s later 1992, Mather, Verstraten, and Anstis 1998 and Sorensen 2002.
8 1988a, 231.
What makes the Waterfall Illusion important to the debate over nonconceptual content is that Crane and others have argued that the contents of these kinds of perceptual experiences are “contradictory.” Crane follows John Frisby who says of the MAE experience:

> although the after-effect gives a very clear illusion of movement, the apparently moving features nevertheless seem to stay still! That is, we are still aware of features remaining in their ‘proper’ locations even though they are seen as moving. What we see is logically impossible!  

It is this fact which motivates the postulation of nonconceptual content for Crane inasmuch as conceptual content cannot be contradictory.

Why can’t conceptual content be contradictory? The supposed reason has to do with the differentiation of concepts. On his view, by definition, “$F$ and $G$ are different concepts if it is possible for a subject to rationally judge, of an object $a$, that $a$ is $F$ and that $a$ is not-G.” If it is possible to rationally judge that a is both F and not-F at the same time, then F cannot be a concept. But then inasmuch as it is part of the MAE experience that some a both is and is not moving, movement must be nonconceptually represented in the experience.

I think there might be reason to resist this understanding of concept differentiation, but I am not going to discuss that here. I’m going to concede this point to Crane, but attempt to escape his nonconceptualist conclusion by arguing that the content of the MAE experience is not contradictory. That said, it’s worth asking, in what sense is the experience of the waterfall illusion contradictory?

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10 Ibid., 144.
A contradiction, I take it, is a statement that cannot be true in virtue of its form. “It both is and is not raining now” is a paradigmatic example of a contradiction, the kind of statement that one might offer as a prime example of a contradiction in a logic class. “Φ · ¬Φ” is a common formalization of a contradiction. Whatever Φ is, whether Φ is true or false, the resulting conjunction of Φ with ¬Φ will always be false.

At first blush, this seems to be what Crane has in mind for his characterization of the content of the MAE experience. If we let Φ be “It is the case that something is moving.” then the content of such an experience is, according to Crane,

C: It is the case that something is moving and it is not the case that that something (the same thing) is moving.

This looks like a clear enough example of a contradiction.

But on closer inspection, it is not at all clear that we can specify the content of the MAE experience in such a way that it fulfills what we can call “the self-identity condition.” The self-identity condition is what assu res us that the thing which is supposed to have the property is the same thing which also does not have the property. But this condition is not met trivially. To meet it, one must be clear as to which fact in the world it is that is supposed to both be there for our seeing and also not be there for our seeing. This is where Crane runs into problems. Let me clarify what I mean here.

Crane is somewhat vague about what this thing Φ is supposed to be that we see in the MAE experience. Is the problem that some object has a property and does not have that property? Or perhaps it’s that some object both is and is not there apart from the
properties that it has? In the original description, Crane imagines us fixating on the waterfall long enough to have adapted ourselves to the movement. After we are suitably adapted, he imagines us looking at an object “such as a stone” beside the waterfall. On this suggestion, according to Crane, what I will see after being primed is that “The stone is moving and not the stone is moving.”

But this characterization of the MAE experience should not satisfy us. We may have pinned down which thing could be relevant to such a characterization, but we haven’t yet said how we attribute to it (i.e., moving and not moving) is supposed to be contradictory. The overwhelmingly natural reply here is to make a distinction between types of movement, and to say that it is moving in one way and not moving in another. For example, any two-year-old knows that there is a difference between moving from one place to the other and squirming in place. Telling them to sit still in one way does not imply that they can’t move about in the other. A spinning top is another common example. If we can make sense of a similar distinction between kinds of movement in the case of the stone (and any other object that Crane can pick out), then there isn’t really a contradiction here at all.11 Perhaps it looks as if the stone is undulating in one way while it sits perfectly still relative to the other objects in the scene.12

11 Another response along these lines would be to say that even if there is only one type of motion here what differs is the times. Perhaps what we’re seeing is something which a minute ago wasn’t moving but now it is. But this is not a contradiction either.

12 Current vision science seems to agree with this assessment. Instead of a simplistic model where motion is detected in one way, the consensus seems to be that there are any number of visual motion cues that the brain combines together to detect when and how something is moving. An account of the MAE experience at this level appeals to the notion that these detectors can work not only independently but can be made to “conflict” with each other. (See Mather and Harris 1998, Ch. 1 for a review of work on the MAE since the mid-sixties.) From the perspective of this essay, these facts (even if true) provide an account of the neurophysiologic mechanisms but this does not answer (or even suggest an answer) the question of how we should characterize the content of the MAE experience.
Now, Crane has responses here. His best response, I think, is to simply insist that there is something strange about the waterfall illusion that needs accounting for and that the one who denies that the experience contains a contradiction owes us a story of the strangeness all the same. There is something right in this. The experience of the waterfall illusion is a very robust one. And it does needs explaining. Since I agree with Crane on this point, let’s try a bit harder to fix the phenomenology of the MAE that accounts for the strangeness. Consider the following image:\textsuperscript{13}

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1**
MAE Waterfall, focal point highlighted

In its original context, the picture here displayed as static was one frame in an animated picture of a rushing waterfall. Its express purpose was to create in the viewer the MAE experience, which explains why the water has been replaced with the jagged

\textsuperscript{13} Figure 1 is a modified screenshot of George Mather’s online demonstration of the MAE, accessed August 4, 2007 at http://www.lifesci.sussex.ac.uk/home/George_Mather/Motion/MAE.HTML. Permission for inclusion here obtained August 20, 2007.
line pattern. This quite deliberate pattern was designed to increase (or arguably produce) the effect, given that one follows the accompanying directions for observing the “waterfall.” One is asked to fixate on the branch which (though it’s hard to make out in this still image, I’ve highlighted the focal point with a white circle) sticks out into the scene of the moving water. After you have been sufficiently adapted, you are directed, freeze the image by hitting a pause button.

Then you are supposed to see something quite strange. And, one must admit, the effect is rather strong. If you are anywhere near a computer as you read this, I recommend you follow the internet address referenced here and check out the effect for yourself. (It’s a lot easier than heading out to the nearest waterfall!)

Ok, let’s say you have done the experiment. What did you see? Crane and others (i.e., Frisby\textsuperscript{14}) say that what we see is a contradiction, an impossibility. How would you characterize the content of your perceptual experience?

Here’s what I notice about this experiment. Having fixated on the branch for a good half-minute or so, when I stop the “water” moving, the effect isn’t that the branch both moves and not moves but that the “water” surrounding the branch moves \textit{up}. It does so quite quickly at first, and then very suddenly slows down and then stops.\textsuperscript{15}

Now this is a strange effect. We know that water moves down a waterfall, not up. But is there a contradiction here? One might reply that there is \textit{something} here which is contradictory. Isn’t seeing water move upwards enough of a contradiction? Crane considers such responses and, to his credit, distances himself from them. For example, he con-

\textsuperscript{14} Frisby 1979.
\textsuperscript{15} Much to my delight, this is how Stafford and Webb—quite matter-of-factly—describe the phenomenology of the MAE experience as well (Stafford and Web 2005, 80).
siders the well-known Müller-Lyer Illusion, where lines of the same length will look to be different when arrows are appended to their ends.¹⁶ He asks the question, does this too present us with a contradiction? Crane says no.

The Müller-Lyer illusion presents a conflict between two intentional states: the state of believing that the lines are the same length and the state of the lines looking to be different lengths… The waterfall illusion, however, presents a contradiction in the one content of one attitude. The viewed seems to be both moving and not moving at the same time … the content of the experience itself is contradictory.¹⁷

So the difference between the Müller-Lyer and MAE experience is that in the former we are conflicted along two different dimensions; things look one way but are believed to be another. In the latter, Crane says, we are conflicted along one dimension. We both see and do not see that the water is moving.

Now, I am hardly the first to point out that it’s not so obvious that there’s a contradiction in the experience of the waterfall illusion, even if we grant Crane the point his point about dimensions. Mellor,¹⁸ e.g., holds that the experience of the waterfall illusion does not present us with a contradiction but rather inclines us to believe contradictory propositions which cancel each other out. Sorenson¹⁹ sees in the waterfall illusion evidence of the operation of inconsistent “homuncular” processes (presumably at the level of visual processing) that are quite common. While these are interesting responses, they have problems. Mellors’s transposition of the discussion into belief talk is suspicious at best. (After all, is Crane going to accept that the contents of perception cannot be char-

¹⁶ The psychology department at the University of Essex has a very good demonstration of the Müller-Lyer illusion that I recommend to all readers at http://www.essex.ac.uk/psychology/experiments/muller.html.
¹⁷ Ibid., 143–4.
¹⁹ Sorenson 2002.
acterized without reference to the characterizations of the contents of belief?) And, with his focus on homuncular processes, it’s not clear that Sorenson can accept Crane’s point that all this takes place in the same dimension.

More importantly for me, however, the standard responses to Crane are not what is called for from a proper phenomenological analysis of the MAE experience. Let me offer my own diagnosis of what is going on.

I think it’s quite significant that there’s this other “Waterfall Illusion” (the one where the water looks to move up) and that the prospect of finding any logically contradictory content in an experience of it is so difficult. This is because I think that the example that I bring to bear does a better job of isolating the MAE and, thus, would better serve the task of the vision scientist. What is interesting in the MAE as it is induced in the case that I discuss is that those parts of one’s retina which were not adapted to the downward motion (i.e., those parts focused on the branch creeping out into view, of course, but even those that make up the periphery of our vision) remain unaffected. This suggests, in simple terms, that the parts of the retina adapted to the downward movement of the jagged line pattern take a half second or so to adjust to the sudden ceasing of the movement. As these parts of the retina “catch up” with the non-action the lines appear to move up.

This will probably sound vague to vision scientist, but on the other hand surely this is more relevant to her than the fact that if our whole visual field is adapted everything in the next scene will look strange. But if so, this suggests a better way to characterize the MAE experience. When one stands in front of a real waterfall (or just adapts one’s whole visual field with motion in one direction) the effect once the motion has stopped will affect the look of everything in one’s visual field equally (corresponding to
the fact that areas of the retina not adapted are not affected at all). If this is right, then once the motion stops and we gaze upon a “normal” scene while still under the influence of the effect of the priming, whatever effects we are “seeing” will not discriminate between those things which are *objects of interest* in our visual field and those that are not. That is, I may choose to focus my attention on one particular rock, particularly if it is something which stands out from the background scene for some reason. But the illusion (in the sense of *misconception*) would be for us to then say that the rock appears to be moving and not to be moving. It seems to me that a better way to characterize the phenomenology of the MAE experience is to say that *there is a certain segment of my visual field which is distorted in certain ways*. I can try and get at what those ways might be by describing the effect it has on my ability to focus on a particular object. But then this would not be a phenomenology of the MAE experience as such, but rather the phenomenology of trying to focus on a particular object given that one is undergoing an MAE experience. My account of the phenomenology of the MAE experience implies that it is incorrect to say that any particular object of interest is affected but rather holds that it is our own visual fields that are (temporarily) distorted. But, again, there is no contradiction in that.\(^\text{20}\)

How could Crane reply? He might try and argue that the waterfall illusion I’m discussing is different from the one he discusses. This would not be a very strong reply, however, and I doubt he would want to take that route. A perhaps better reply would be for him to agree with me that, at bottom, the phenomenology of the MAE experience

\(^{20}\) Now, this is not meant to be a psychological explanation in any sense; for one thing, no matter how suggestive it is, it’s still much too vague to characterize the workings of the mechanism (whatever they be) that would explain why my experience has just this phenomenology. I rather take it that I’ve offered an account of what it’s like to have an MAE experience.
concerns our visual fields and not the objects of the world that we might try to focus on as we are under the affect of the MAE but then claim that he is trying to get at that, as it were, second-order effect: what it’s like to focus on an object under the influence of the MAE. He might believe that my points are mere technicalities and that his account need only be transposed but not substantially changed to meet them. I disagree with this, however, for then I would want to insist that part of recognizing the sense in which focusing in on an object, given that the MAE experience is a second-order question, is an understanding of the way in which perceptual content is acquired on an “all-things-being-equal” assumption of normally-functioning sensible faculties. Any sound phenomenology of the MAE experience that included talk of objects would have to be qualified by talk of how things “seem to me” given our prior knowledge that our sensible faculties are not functioning normally. But, again, there is no contradiction in some thing’s seeming to move and not move at the same time.

On my view, then, Crane’s characterization of what it’s like to be us is both implausible and unprincipled. He fails in identifying anything that is best characterized as a contradiction in the content of our perceptual experience. As a result, his nonconceptualist argument does not go through.

2.4 Analog Experience

The second reason to posit the existence of nonconceptual content in experience, recall, is the so called-called analog nature of experience. Much of the general form of my analysis of the a-logical nature of experience can be brought to bear here; the worries are in some ways very similar. Perhaps the biggest difference is that though phenomenologi-
cal considerations are brought to bear in apparent support for the analog nature of experience, the ontological considerations do most of the work real work.

The phrase “analog” was most influentially applied to the contents of experience by Fred Dretske, most influentially in his work information processing models of the mind. On his view, by taking the notion of information as primary, and thinking of the mind as an information processor, and cognition as information processing, information processing views place the concepts of cognition in their proper context. It is in thus placing them that we will best understand what they are individually and how they relate and function holistically.

As regards the contents of perceptual experiences, Dretske does not deny that more traditional views—views not based on the notion of information—try to correctly place perception alongside beliefs and desires. They recognize a kind of “passive” role for perception and an “active” one for the higher cognitive states of believing or desiring that such and such. But what they fail to recognize is that the information processed by these different kinds of processes is fundamentally different. Here’s how he puts the point, along with his conclusion:

Perception [on a traditional view] is concerned with the pickup and delivery of information, cognition with its utilization. But these, one is told, are merely different stages in a more or less continuous information-handling process. Recognition, identification, and classification (cognitive activities) occur at every phase of the perceptual process. Seeing and hearing are low-grade forms of knowing.

I think this is a confusion. It obscures the distinctive role of sensory experience in the entire cognitive process.22

21 See in particular Dretske 1981.
22 Dretske 1981, 135.
The problem with traditional views is that they misunderstand the place of sensory experience. And they do so because they lack an understanding of the kind of information processed there as well as how it gets processed.

Here’s an example of the kind of thing Dretske wants us to recognize about sensory experience:

You are looking a fairly complex scene—a crowd of youngsters at play…. A reaction typical of such encounters, especially when they are brief, is that one has seen more than was (or perhaps could be) consciously noticed or attended to. There were (as it turns out) 27 children in the playground, and though you, perhaps, saw all of them, you are unaware of how many you saw. Unless you had time to count, you do not believe you saw 27 children (although you certainly believe something less specific—e.g., that you say many children or over a dozen children). You saw 27 children, but this information, precise numerical information, is not reflected in what you know or believe. There is no cognitive representation of this fact. To say one saw this many children (without realizing it) is to imply that there was some sensory representation of each item. The information got in. It was perceptually coded. Why else would it be true to say that you saw 27 children rather than 26 or 28? Therefore, the information that is cognitively extracted from the sensory representation (the information, namely, that there are many children in the yard, or over a dozen children) is information that the sensory structure codes in analogue form.23

Examples such as this play two roles for Dretske. First, they are supposed to bring to mind familiar experiences and ring true phenomenologically. I have looked over a crowd of children at a playground (or a crowd of fans at the ballpark, or a crowd of students at a lecture, and so on). And I have felt both that I had seen and yet somehow missed the scene before me. I don’t know how many people were at the ball park, nor can I tell just by looking how many of my students are in attendance for today’s lecture. Dretske wants us to consider the phenomenological facts in these situations. I agree.

23 Ibid., 33–34.
Second, they are supposed to teach us how to think about information in his sense. That is, for all that he is supposed to be letting the phenomenology guide us, one must understand the sense in which he is also guiding us in the learning of his terminology. It goes hand in hand with his view that we do not have a good grasp of the way information flows through the cognitive structures of the mind. For Dretske, it is in extrapolating from the phenomenological facts that we find this out. This too I would agree with, which makes the issue largely (and I think correctly) a phenomenological one.

So what are the phenomenological facts? Dretske is right to point out that there are such experiences. And he’s right to point out that there is some sense in which each of the children on the playground affect my sensory organs (that light bouncing off them each of them reaches my retina). We even agree that we would be unaware of seeing 27 children. Where we disagree is in what we would say about the phenomenology of the experience. Dretske wants to say that our experience of the scene at the playground would be determinately of 27 children even if we could not say as much, but I want to rather say our experience is indeterminate. Let me explain.

The phenomenological characterization here is more complicated than I think Dretske realizes. Dretske takes for granted that we would characterize the content of our perceptual experience as “seeing 27 children on the playground.” “Why else” he says “would it be true to say that you saw 27 children rather than 26 or 28?” As is so often the case with hypothetical questions, the real question isn’t “Why else?” but “Why?”. Why should we say that one sees 27 children on the playground if one cannot identify them as such?
Dretske, I think, is falling back on a common way of talking about experiential content. He is confusing *what is seen* with *what is there to be seen.*\(^{24}\) This is quite common in characterizations of experience. We don’t often have to be very specific about the contents of another’s perceptions. If I am directing my wife’s attention to a bird in a tree off our balcony—to get her to “see” the chirping hummingbird—I will have felt I succeeded when she was able to follow the bird’s movements on her own. This is enough for me to count her as seeing it. If she cannot quite tell me the color of its crown, I still say that she saw the bird, even if I would admit that she didn’t see the color of crown. This evinces the fact that our characterizations of experiences are often vague.

The issue is whether or not these characterizations are accurate, whether or not they represent the phenomenological facts or the laziness of the speaker. Here’s where I think ideology really comes in. Dretske wants us to believe that the full detail of a scene is seen. “There were (as it turns out) 27 children in the playground, and though you, perhaps, *saw all of them,* you are unaware of how many you saw.”\(^{25}\) In virtue of what do we say that you saw all the children? The only argument I can see for this is the response that *that’s what was there to be seen.*

If in talking this way we are characterizing the contents of her experience, then we recognize a certain laxity in the phenomenological facts as we report them. Subjects often miss the fine details of a visual scene. This is perhaps because their interests run toward the generalities of what is there to be experienced. But let’s ask the question, Could it ever be possible to say that you saw a *bunch* of children and leave it at that? Can

\(^{24}\) Again, this point holds for all sensory modalities.

the generic “bunch” be the right descriptor of the content of the experience? I think so, as long as we think that bunches have a look to them. Perhaps a bunch is just a suitably large collection. When I am at a baseball game looking across the field into the stands, it certainly looks to me like there’s a big crowd of people there, a bunch of other people. Big crowds have a look to them.

Wilfrid Sellars seemed to believe in the generic as a possible content of experience. In his discussion of “looks talk” in (Sellars 1956), he took the notion of generic experience seriously enough to think it an advantage of his views on perception that they could make sense of them. He says,

Another merit of the account is that it explains how a necktie, for example, can look red to S at t, without looking scarlet or crimson or any other determinate shade of red. In short it explains how things can have a merely generic look, a fact which would be puzzling indeed if looking red were a natural as opposed to epistemic fact about objects.26

As a result,

x can look red to S, without it being true of some specific shade of red that x looks to S to be of that shade, and the fact that S can believe that Cleopatra’s Needle is tall, without its being true of some determinate number of feet that S believes it to be that number of feet tall.27

Compare Sellars’s views with Dretske’s example of the children on the playground. Both are phenomenological sketches; they claim to say something about what it’s like to be us. Sellars asserts that things can look generic with respect to their properties where Dretske insists that all the detail “gets in,” and he supports the supposed obviousness of this fact by noting that it accounts for a truism about how we characterize perceptual experiences. (Recall that he says, “The information got in. It was perceptually coded. Why else would

26 Sellars 1956, §17.
27 Ibid.
it be true to say that you saw 27 children rather than 26 or 28?" The problem is that *we don’t just say that we saw determinate properties unless we are equating what is seen with what is there to be seen.* And this is just plain bad phenomenology.

Of course, differences in ontological commitment come out clearly as well when we make this comparison. Sellars admits that if one were to adopt a naturalist perspective, the notion of generic experience looks odd. All red things are a particular shade of red; all groups of children are made up of an exact number of children. But, importantly, we need an argument as to why just this way of characterizing the contents of experience is required before we deny the phenomenology of generic experiences.

Before I end this section, let me discuss two quick points. One might try and defend Dretske by referring to the results of some experiments done by George Sperling. Some have assumed that Sperling (in Sperling 1960) has shown that information that subjects fail to report can sometimes nevertheless be shown to be part of the experiential content. If, e.g., subjects cannot say whether or not there were 27 children present on the playground but then they perform in certain behavioral tests in ways that only someone responding to 27 children could perform, we might want to say that they saw 27 children. But there are two points to make here. First, it bears repeating that we are talking about the contents of conscious experiences, i.e., what is phenomenally reported. It’s not at all clear that what gets shown in Sperling-style results has any bearing on the contents of experience. But second, even if one believes that Sperling-style results must bear on our discussion, it’s not that clear what they mean. If it is shown that a subject responds

29 Thanks to Jonathan Cohen for pushing me on this point, as well as bringing to my attention the essay by Fodor which I discuss in the next paragraph.
differently to 27 children on the playground than they do to 26 children or 28 children, it is still an open possibility what subjects are responding to in such circumstances. Perhaps it \textit{just is the case} that 28 children is too many for a playground more comfortably suited to 27 (for whatever reason). If a subject responds to this, then his differential response is most accurately characterized by reference to it, not the number of children itself. In other words, it begs the question to say that subjects must be representing 27 children if they respond differentially to 26 or 28. As long as 26 or 28 children look different in virtue of other, less determinate or more generic, aspects that they possess, it will always be open to the theorist to use these facts to characterize a subject's experience.

A different reply might appear to be called for in response to Jerry Fodor’s argument for a Given in experience in his recent “The Revenge of the Given” (Fodor 2007). Fodor there refers to the Sperling experiments, arguing that they show that there are representations which are unconceptualized but still contentful. But he provides an example of a phenomena which might seem to work in a slightly different manner: the peculiar experience of (a) noticing after a few chimes of a clock that the clock is indeed chiming, (b) realizing that one wants to know the time, and then (c) “counting” the chimes that have already happened to determine the current time. Fodor argues that RTM (the Representational Theory of Mind that he endorses) has the resources to explain such phenomena inasmuch as it posits—you guessed it—non-conceptual content. On his view, before one realized that the clock was chiming, one still represented those chimes in short-term memory. When one realizes that one wants to know the time, one accesses the representations in the short term memory, and thus brings them under the concept \textsc{chime} as well as that of \textsc{number}.
The important point for Fodor is that even before one brought these representations under a concept one had a representation of them. (It was the representations, after all, that were accessed in short-term memory and thus made retroactive counting possible.) Such representations, Fodor argues, are non-discursive, and thus nonconceptual, inasmuch as they are “iconic”—that is, they have no canonical decomposition into meaning-bearing parts like conceptual representations (which break down into words and logical constants). Fodor seems to treat this and the Sperling results as showing the same thing, but I would tend to disagree with this assessment on the grounds that the retroactive counting experience appears to be determinate in a way that the Sperling results (or so I have suggested) do not. Paying attention to the chiming clock after 3 chimes, and then catching up it (as it were) is quite naturally understood as accessing one’s memory, which then is quite naturally understood as conceptualizing whatever content was there so as to bring it into explicit thought. (It is such natural explanations which make RTM look so promising to so many.) But the theorist of generic content has an explanation of his own. If we can say that triads (or pairs, or fours, etc.) have a generic look to them, we can say that it is the temporally-extended experience of a triad (like that of a three-note melody) that is stored in memory in this case, not representations of the chimes themselves. This is part and parcel with saying that interpretations of experience are stored in memory (a theory which is made more plausible the more we come to grips with the way memory “distorts” the facts instead of recording them). As a further point, note that the appearance of more complex arrangements of parts is much less easy to recognize; it isn’t easy to figure out the time if one starts paying attention to the chimes after eight of them. Fodor would (I take it) say that here he have reached the limit of what the sort term
memory can hold. This would be one way to go. But if we can rather say that lines-of-8 (as a general form that things are configured in) are harder to recognize, and thus store as an experience of hearing a line of 8 chimes, a generic content account can successfully explain our inability to retroactively “count” the chimes (or, more carefully, to tell the time when one starts paying attention after too long) as well.

More to the point, though, it should not go unsaid that it’s hard to know quite what to say to Fodor for the same reason that it’s hard to know what to say to Dretske. Fodor is quite explicit at the beginning of his (2007) that he is working within the scope of RTM. But again, if one’s ontology forces one to accept the existence of nonconceptual content, then, to someone who is working within another tradition or paradigm, that conclusion should be seen as a fact about them and their tradition. I have denied the representationalist paradigm on the grounds that, in experience, the world be its own best model. (I’ll present further arguments for this perspective, which I call a commitment to the robustness of experiential content, in the next two chapters.) As a result, I think we should be less concerned with Fodor’s argument for the existence of nonconceptual content and more concerned to explain the phenomena that he points to. And, although my account here has been much too quick, I think I’ve shown that an account involving generic experience has the resources to explain the phenomena of Fodor’s interesting clock example.

2.5 The Fineness of Grain of Perceptual Experience

Both this and the next reasons for positing nonconceptual content are relatively free from ontological commitments, focusing more squarely on the phenomenology of
experience. This is a good thing. Both Crane and Dretske offer some pretty dubious phenomenological claims. Perhaps an increase in phenomenological acuity will pay off in better data with which to construct our account of mental content.

Many in the nonconceptual content debate credit Gareth Evans with being the first to raise the fineness of grain concern in what looks to be (for all intents and purposes) little more than a throwaway line in his *Varieties of Reference*. He says,

Do we really understand the proposal that we have as many colour concepts as there are shades of colour that we can sensibly discriminate?\(^{30}\)

One might be tempted to say:

Sure! Why shouldn’t we? When I look over at my bookshelf from my place here at my desk, all of the books have colors that I can discriminate from each other. And for each one of them I can say “red,” or “green,” or “brown,” etc.

What’s wrong with this reply?

A natural defense of Evans would be to say that I am not *really* attending to the detail of my experiences in my characterization. For instance, someone might want to say:

Look closer and you will notice that the blue of this book isn’t quite the same as the blue of that book, which isn’t quite the same as the blue of that book,” and so for all the blue books there in that bookshelf. “Call them all blue if you insist, but inasmuch as they are all slightly different colors, and inasmuch as I can *see* that this is the case even when I do not *say* that it is the case, this just goes to show that perceptual experience is more richly detailed than my descriptions of it.

There’s an obvious problem with this way of putting it, though. Saying that I see all those shades of blue because they are there to be seen confuses what is seen with what there is

\(^{30}\) Evans 1982, 229.
to be seen. Perhaps I don’t see all those shades. How can one convince me that I do and thus that they are any part of my visual experience?

Careful followers of Evans’, such as Christopher Peacocke, have tried to answer this challenge by appealing to the *discriminative capacities* of a subject. A discriminative capacity is, just as it sounds, a capacity to discriminate between different things. Such discrimination is based on the properties of objects and concerns our sensitivity to some properties and not others. If a subject shows himself to be sensitive to variations in a property of an object, he is said to be able to discriminate one variation from the other and vice versa. Put this way, the challenge of the fineness of the grain of perceptual experience is that subjects can discriminate the fine-grained properties of objects in the world through perception that they are not otherwise able to cognize (where we take that only in cognition are concepts brought into play).

Peacocke has discussed the fineness of grain of perceptual experience many times, first as an argument against his own conceptualist position (in Peacocke 1983), but more recently qua nonconceptualist as an argument he endorses. Here’s a quote from a recent work by Peacocke entitled “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content”:

When you look at the new Art Museum in Bilbao, or see a new abstract sculpture, or the face of a person, you see each of these objects as having a quite specific shape and size. Similarly, you see each of them as having quite specific shades of colors, surface textures and contours. Equally, when you hear a musical tone, there is a sense in which you perceive its pitch. You may not recognize the tone—you may not have absolute pitch—but you can discriminate that pitch from many, many others if you are asked to compare it with another. This discrimination is based on the way the tone sounds to you.

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31 See Peacocke 1992, Peacocke 2001a, and Peacocke 2001b as examples of his recent nonconceptualism.

32 Peacocke 2001a, 2–3.
Note that in order to be troubled by this one would have to have denied the possibility of generic experiences. Perhaps I don’t see the “quite specific” shapes and sizes of the abstract sculptures as I browse Guggenheim’s collection. Perhaps I’m just running my eyes over the objects and the fine grained details that are said to be there aren’t. But let’s consider the point further.

Argument from the fineness of grain of perceptual experience only work inasmuch as we set the discriminative capacities of a subject up against his other, concept-involving capacities. In the Peacocke quote above, the comparison is subtle. He compares the capacity to discriminate a particular pitch with the capacity (or set of capacities) we refer to as “perfect pitch.” I’ve only really known one person with this capacity, the pianist in my high school jazz band, and she could tell you (with pretty good accuracy) which note you were playing at any given time. This suggests that the capacity to identify properties evinces concept possession. And since we cannot identity the exact shape of the a sculpture but see it anyway, our seeing it must be nonconceptual.

Not all nonconceptualist arguments from the fineness of grain of perceptual experience compare discrimination and identification, however. This is perhaps because identification is not quite conceptual enough to make the point. The most common comparison pits discrimination and communication. Since, as the average nonconceptualist seems to assume, the average conceptualist practically equates language-involving with concept-involving, showing that language fails the subject is the same as showing that concepts fail them.

Conceptualists have offered responses here. John McDowell has asserted that,
In the throes of an experience of the kind that putatively transcends one’s conceptual powers—an experience that *ex hypothesi* affords a suitable sample—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.\(^{33}\)

Bill Brewer makes essentially the same point when he says,

…the fineness of grain in perceptual discrimination is matched precisely by the perceptual demonstrative *concepts* which the subject has in virtue of conscious contact with the items in question. In other words, for any fineness of grain in perceptual content to which my opponent wishes to appeal in making this argument, the subject is capable of making a perceptual demonstrative *judgment*, “that is thus”, with just that fineness of grain. Paradigmatically conceptual judgment therefore matches perception precisely in respect to fineness of grain.\(^{34}\)

Both McDowell and Brewer posit a kind of “demonstrative concept,” a concept which is importantly context dependent. McDowell talks about a demonstrative concept which “exploits the presence” of the object. We can see Brewer as spelling out what this means when he talks about “conscious contact with the items in question.” On their view, our ability to say something generic like “that shade,” “that sound,” etc., in response to *any* shade, sound, etc. means that we can characterize perceptual experience just as finely as it’s presented to us.

There’s something profoundly unsatisfying about this response, however. Imagine yourself walking into a shop selling exotic wares from some far away time or place. You see something that looks interesting, but you can’t quite make out what it is. You ask the shopkeeper, “What is this thing?” The shopkeeper replies, “It’s that thing.” “What thing?” you reply. “One of those things that it is.” Of course this won’t do; you’d be annoyed. You know it’s one of those things, or whatever. The shopkeeper’s response is


\(^{34}\) Brewer 1999, 172.
vacuous given what you already know. Isn’t this just what McDowell and Brewer are recommending our reply to the fineness of grain problem should be?

There are two things to say here. First, it isn’t enough that the speaker make use of the presence of the sample in uttering a demonstrative. The person to whom the speaker wishes to communicate also makes use of the sample in understanding the utterance. This holds for all indexicals (phrases like “here” and “now”), not just demonstratives. If I call my mother and she asks me where I am, it’s no good for me to say “here” if she doesn’t know where “here” is (in at least some vague sense). Similarly if I write her an undated letter and tell her what I am thinking now. These indexical phrases don’t rely on the presence of the sample in McDowell’s terms in the quite the same sense that demonstratives do, but this can’t mean that they don’t rely on them at all. Second, we can take this a step further since many accounts of meaning—inspired by Frege’s context principle\(^{35}\) whereby only in the context of a sentence does a word have a meaning—hold that only in the context of a set of communicative practices do sentences get their meaning. If a holism of this sort is right, then just as demonstratives exploit the presence of a sample to get their content, so do all linguistic acts get their content in virtue of exploiting the context in which the utterance was made. Demonstrative concepts, on such accounts, are not unique in their context dependency. As a result, one cannot accuse demonstrative concepts of not being truly conceptual because in virtue of the context dependency alone, as those who would define concepts as universals and contrast them with nonconceptual particulars.

\(^{35}\) Frege 1884, in particular §§ 60 and 106. “[T]he meaning of a word is to be defined not in isolation, but in the context of a proposition” (127).
Even so, there is an important point on which I would want to disagree with McDowell’s and Brewer’s notion of a demonstrative concept. Both McDowell and Brewer talk the language of what I termed *propositionalism* in the previous chapter (§1.4). I say “talk the language” because it’s not altogether clear to me that they really buy into the two parts of propositionalism as I understand it: representationalism and sententialism. But the problem is that even if they do not buy into these views they talk as if they believe that the contents of experience are best understood in terms of representations in the forms of sentences anyway. This, I want to argue, makes them particularly susceptible to the fineness of grain argument, and distorts what I think is a proper understanding of the nature of demonstrative concepts.

To see that this is the case, consider first Sellars’s discussion of generic experiences, Sellars offers the following assessment of the situation:

> The core of the explanation, of course, is that the propositional claim involved in such an experience may be, for example, either the more determinable claim “This is red” or the more determinate claim “This is crimson.” The complete story is more complicated, and requires some account of the role in these experiences of the “impressions” or “immediate experiences” the logical status of which remains to be determined. 36

Much has been made in the literature of McDowell’s disagreement with Sellars’s latter point here. In McDowell 1994/1996 and even more pointedly in McDowell 1998, McDowell denies that there is a “complete story” which includes impressions (though, of course, it depends on what exactly one means by impressions). But the thing I want to focus on is how later philosophers have treated the idea that there are propositional claims in experience. Sellars puts his point about generic experience in terms of proposi-

36 Sellars 1956, §17.
tional claims that make use of generic terms and are thus less determinable than claims made with more specific terms. If we adopt this way of looking at things, the debate between the nonconceptualist and the conceptualist is whether or not all contents can be expressed in propositions, where here we mean to say that giving expression to content through the construction of meaningful sentences evinces our ability to grasp the propositions that mental and linguistic content is supposed to express in sentences.37 (There is a parallel debate in epistemology, where there the issue is whether or not all knowledge is propositional or if there is also non-propositional (in the form of “situated”) knowledge.)

To see in more detail how this plays out in nonconceptualist hands, consider once again Peacock’s views. Peacocke posits two kinds of nonconceptual contents in perceptual experience: (1) positioned scenarios and (2) protopropositions. A positioned scenario is a particular place in time and space (which is why it’s “positioned” as opposed to, say, abstract or hypothetical). The idea is that at least part of the contents of a perceptual experience is the place in time and space containing the objects the experience could be said to be of. That is, if I have a perceptual experience of a red ball, part of the content of that experience is the here and now where the ball exists, inasmuch as physical objects are necessarily experienced as somewhere and -when. If positioned scenarios can be understood as the place where and when the object perceived is, protopropositions can be understood to be the object itself along with its properties and relations to other objects. Both are necessary for Peacocke inasmuch as the contents of perceptual experiences are

37 This is a merely technical point about what is doing the different kinds of expressing when we talk about propositions. I make this point because the most common way to characterize what a proposition is as what it is that a sentence or thought expresses (where the sentences does the expressing) but in recognition of the fact that philosophers also often talk about expressing contents in propositions which seems to suggest that it is contents that are expressed. I take it this second way is only a way of talking that the propositionalist could do without.
particular as opposed to general. When we see a red ball, we don’t just see something which stands for red balls, an abstract object under which all red balls are subsumed. We see a particular thing, a red ball itself.

Now, Peacocke contrasts his kind of particularist account (where the object itself is part of the content of the experience) from the pure propositionalist account where “propositional contents exhaust the nonconceptual representational content of experience” or, more accurately, an account “that identifies the representational content [of a perceptual experience] with a set of propositions (whether built to Frege’s, Russell’s, or some other specification) where the constituents of these propositions do not involve scenarios directly or indirectly.”

Peacocke says that pure propositionalist accounts have a number of problems. For example, he asks us to:

Suppose you are in a field in the early autumn in England and see mist in a certain region. Can a theorist specify part of the representational content of your visual experience by means of the proposition that the region has the property of being misty?

Peacocke says that even on accounts where the region itself is part of the proposition (so-called Russelian propositions) there are important differences between a person who sees the region from a particular spot, spot $x$, say, and another person which sees the region from spot $1$ foot to the left of spot $x$.

Each of you sees it as being in a different direction relative to yourself, and your actions may differ as a result. Any description of the contents of your two experiences that omits this difference is incomplete.

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38 Peacocke 1992, 71.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 70.
41 Ibid.
The problem with pure propositionalism, then, is that egocentric space is not included in the pure propositional account whereas positioned scenarios are positioned relative to a subject.

How does the McDowell/Brewer demonstrative concept measure up to Peacocke’s worries here? It seems to be a part of their response that the demonstrative “here” (where the uttering is accompanied by a pointing, or where the thinking is accompanied by a kind of mental “picking out” in awareness) is included in the content of such demonstratives. If so, then any proposition that includes demonstratives like this will also include both the thing picked out and the person doing the picking.

But there’s still room for complaint here. Any account which incorporates egocentric space as part of the propositional content might be seen as betraying the heart of the pure propositionalist account. Inasmuch as the pure propositionalist seeks to maintain contents (qua propositions) as abstract objects, at least to the degree that they are merely potential contents of an experience, they must cut away from any particular’s experience. This is important inasmuch as they are supposed to play a role in communication and knowledge acquisition. If we make the content of a proposition too specific, then propositions cannot be shared, or ever expressed by more than one person, or ever expressed by more than one person only one time. That is, too much particularity is no good lest communication and knowledge acquisition is impossible, but too little particularity seems phenomenologically problematic.

This problem is all the more pressing, to the point of seeming impossibility, when familiar arguments of the “you-can’t-know-what-it’s-like-to-be-another” come into play. What makes my experience uniquely mine is not just that it happens to a creature who
sits here, or who has followed this world-line and not that. There are, presumably, special features of my experience which are unique to me qua experiencing subject. Perhaps I see green a little differently than you do, or perhaps I hear slightly differently than you do. I take it that spectral inversion cases (where perhaps you see green when I see red and so on) are a special case of the general point that I am rehearsing here.

But then here’s the question: Who ever said the conceptualist had to be a pure propositionalist? The problem I have with propositionalism is that it sets undesirable limitations on what it is to communicate or acquire knowledge. There may be some things that cannot be put into words, in which case the pure propositionalist is facing a problem. But there are ways of communicating that are just as conceptual—just as fraught with “ought,” as Sellars said—that to describe the contents of experience that are characterized by means of them as nonconceptual would be unmotivated. The differences between discrimination and communication that play such an important role in the fineness of grain argument melt away once we recognize conceptual but nonpropositional forms of communication that are just as fine-grained as our ability to discriminate.

We will explore these ways of communicating and acquiring knowledge, and their implications for the contents of perceptual experiences in due course. But let it suffice for the time to say that one can reject not only the pure propositionalism that Peacocke attributes to his adversary, but also the sententialist-representationalism (pure or not) that

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42 Note that this is only on some readings of what a proposition is and does not touch those, e.g., that think that propositions are sets of possible worlds. I take it that these accounts are outside the sphere of this discussion, however, as they do not even attempt to characterize the contents of what one says, thinks, or does in terms that respect the way the speaker, etc., think about their speaking, etc.

43 Sellars 1962, 212. Brandom, in his 1994, makes use of this phrase as well.
seems to underlie the McDowell/Brewer response as well. I don’t believe that the way to handle cases of characterizing fine-grained experiences is to posit demonstratives which can be incorporated in a propositionalist account. We should abandon propositionalism and go from there.

2.6 The Unit-Free Nature of Perception

Comparing this final nonconceptualist argument to the one just discussed, it’s helpful to note that both point to a perceived difference in what we might call the complexity of our perceptual experiences as against the complexity of our ability to (propositionally) characterize our perceptual experience. The main difference is that worries about the unit-free nature of perception have nothing to do with the coarseness of our abilities to communicate experiential contents, but rather with the seeming impossibility to communicate certain kinds of mental contents even if (perhaps per impossible) we have complete communicative resources.

Another way to put this is to say that there are supposedly elements of our perceptual experience that are so elusive that simply pointing to them, as McDowell and Brewer suggest conceptualists ought to handle the fineness of grain problem, won’t do. Because of this, the unit-free nature of perceptual experience poses more of a problem for the conceptualist, and is perhaps a problem for the kind of anti-propositionalist position that I hinted at moment ago.

Here’s the thought (as characterized by Bermúdez):

If I perceptually represent an object as being a certain distance from me I do not represent that distance in terms of a particular unit (in inches, say, as opposed to centimeters), even though what I represent is a perfectly
determinate distance. I simply represent it as being *that* distance, where the content of my perception specifies the distance. It is difficult to see, however, how such unit-free representations can be accommodated in propositional terms.\footnote{Bermúdez 2001.}

The puzzle here arises from the fact that I cannot say with much (much less perfect) accuracy what distance, say, that wall is from where I am, but it does seem to be represented in perceptual experience as some determinate distance just the same. This seems to imply that things like distance are represented in experience in ways which differ from how they are represented in systems useful to the communication of and the transmitting of knowledge about distances.

For propositionalist accounts, the worry is serious. Consider a few examples: Say I walk outside and it feels hot. I do not represent it as being 94 degrees Fahrenheit, but simply hot. Or say I lift a dog into the bed of a truck. I do not represent him as weighing 15 pounds, but simply as being light for his size. Say I hear someone sing the Oscar Meyer Weiner song. I do not represent them as singing it in any particular key, G, say, but simply as singing it. What can we say about these examples?

But what about the obvious assumption of definiteness? Bermúdez asserts that “what I represent is a perfectly determinate distance.” What does this mean? It is true that it’s not in any way *hazy* for me; there’s no sci-fi space/time “rift” between me and the wall that would make it look indeterminately distanced. But this is not the only way to imagine a phenomenology of generic experiential content. A propositionalist account in the context of generic experiences would say that we are operating with a concept whose
content is the demonstrative concept “that distance” where the distance itself is in the extension of that concept.

Here we can start to develop a non-propositionalist account of the content of experience based on the challenge presented by the unit-free nature of perceptual experience. Let’s see if we can think of an example which it seems must be definite, thus acting as a counterexample to Sellars’ notion of generic experiences.

Consider a favorite example of Adrian Cussins, his discussion of two ways of knowing speed.\textsuperscript{45} One is in terms of miles per hour, where to know our speed is to know how many miles per hour we are going. Cussins thinks of this ways of characterizing speed as that which is answerable to reason giving. When the police officer asks him what speed he is going, when he sees the judge about why he got his 15\textsuperscript{th} speeding ticket, when he’s booked overnight in jail, all these things happen in virtue of his going so many miles per hour. Thus miles-per-hour here is a kind of conceptual fact, a state of affairs in the world that one can only know in virtue of having the concepts MILE PER HOUR, or some such.

Another way of knowing one’s speed is insofar as we have an active engagement with the world. When Cussins is speeding through the streets of London on his motorcycle, he doesn’t bother to pay attention to the speedometer. (So what if he gets another ticket?) But does this mean that he doesn’t know what speed he’s going? How could it? Cussins’s view is that the fact that he’s able to skillfully maneuver the motorcycle though the streets at high speed without incident proves that he knows how fast he is going, even if he cannot say how many miles per hour it is. If one does not think that this is a form of

\textsuperscript{45} In his Postscript to “The Connectionist Construction of Concepts” in Gunther 2003.
knowing his speed, then that must be because they have a strange account of knowing (most likely a propositionalist one).

I think Cussins is right to point to such distinctions, for there clearly is a difference here in our ways of knowing. But no one is arguing that concept involvement in cognition is limited to the knowing mind or to the procurement of knowledge alone. Even if one were to say that all cognition is connected to knowing—in the sense that all that is cognized can be known—this does not imply that all cognition is knowing. What Cussins recognizes is that active engagement with the world is not to be explained in terms of propositional knowing.

What we need is a way of characterizing the contents of action that, though they highlight the role of concepts, are non-propositional. As will be shown in the Chapter 4, my account accomplishes this by assuming that in cognition the world is its own best model. This means that in cognition, when we can get away with it, we do not bother to represent the world at all, but that we rather use its easy availability to us as a kind of external prop upon which we hoist our experience. In this way, my account is anti-representational when it can be, i.e., when the phenomenology of experience suggests it. This will be greatly expanded later.46

But let me offer a conceptualist reply to Cussins’s motorcycle example. I find myself involved in different cognitive activities. One of them is calculating the speed of the vehicle I am operating as measured by an outside observer to the scene, someone who is concerned with determining how many miles per hour I am traveling at a given time. This is not something I am cognitively built for. I neither see nor act in ways which would

46 In §4.5 below.
evince an ability to do this with any precision. I could not watch a car go by and tell you how fast it was traveling. I do not discriminate in this way. Yet I know it sometimes needs to be done and in these circumstances I allow tools designed for just this purpose to assist me in making this determination.

On the other hand, I am fairly well fit to navigate my environment in a more engaged, subject-centered sense. I can see when the car ahead of me is slowing down, or when there is enough space for my car to fit into that parking space. Inasmuch as I see just these things, and inasmuch as these things are defined in terms of what I can and must do as a result of them, I am operating conceptually. The contents of such experiences are not representational, but they are related to each other in ways that are open to rational thought and normative evaluation. In other words: they are conceptual.

There’s another reply here that should be discussed, one that does not rely on an anti-representationalist bent of mind. It’s possible that the represented units involved in skillful action, such as riding a motorcycle through the streets London, are wholly different than the units found on any ruler. Such units are rather “action-relevant,” i.e., they have to do with the actions that a motorcycle rider must make if he is to navigate safely. If such units were indeterminate in what they represented, or vague in what counted as being represented by them, they could be used in representationalist and sententialist accounts of the contents of expert behavior. They would offer the theorist a way to charac-

47 It should be stated that in offering a conceptualist reply here I am not using that reply to reject Cussins’s views. I am, rather, trying to make clear that conceptualists have a good reply to what I take to be a serious and sensitive phenomenological point. This is just to say that although it is here that I first make clear what the criteria on the conceptual are, such criteria are not being used in an argument against Cussins directly, but only indirectly against someone that might claim that conceptualists have no good account of the phenomenology of unit-free experience.
terize the contents of skillful action which do not rely on precise units of measurement which otherwise have little to do with riding a motorcycle.

2.7 Conclusion

We’ve spent this chapter examining four influential lines of nonconceptualist argument. What I think we’ve seen is that, more often than not, they rely on either bad phenomenology or ideological ontologies. Working through them, however, did reveal some general outlines of a position which avoids the legitimate problems they raise. What is called for is a nonpropositionalist position that recognizes the many facets of concept involvement in cognition and yet denies representationalism. The next two chapters represent an attempt to develop such a position. In Chapter 3, we will turn to the metaphysics of experience by examining different views of experience and their attending epistemologies and phenomenologies as determined by the identity of their proper objects. As will be argued, experience requires nothing less than factive receptivity to the world, the capacity to perceive states of affairs of the world. In Chapter 4, the implications of experience requiring factive receptivity to the world are explored and the connection to conceptualism made.48

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48 Thanks to George Mather for permission to use a modified screenshot of his MAE demonstration on page 38.
3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we’ll examine a series of views on the content of experience. The first view in this series conceives of experience as minimal—as mere impingements on our sensory systems. I argue that there are compelling epistemological and phenomenological reasons to make this minimal notion more robust, until finally we end up with a notion that I think is maximally robust, what I call a \textit{robust} notion of experience. (As I’ll put it, experience is robust in two senses: (1) It is robust inasmuch as it is a complex interplay between perception, thought, and action. And (2) among its contents are facts, which are robust when compared to other more minimal possibilities such as objects or impressions.) We’ll be examining this series of views so as both motivate and fill out the robust notion of experience that I prefer.

This chapter forms the first half of a two-part argument for conceptualism: (1) that we need a robust notion of experience and (2) that a robust notion of experience implies conceptualism. The second part of this two-part argument is taken up in Chapter 4.

What fundamentally distinguishes different accounts of experience is their answer to questions concerning the identity of the \textit{objects of experience}. For example: Do we experience atoms in the void or middle-sized dry goods? This matters because there are
phenomenological facts that must be accounted for and epistemological consequences that must be dealt with as a result.

In taking the position that we can approach an account of the content of experience by analyzing the proper objects of experience, I am following a long philosophical tradition in thinking about the nature of the mental, one brought to contemporary philosophy of mind by Franz Brentano in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint.*\(^1\) His task there, in 1874, was to provide the new science of psychology a firm grounding. He attempts to do so by maintaining (1) that all sciences could be characterized by the phenomena they study and (2) that psychology could be distinguished from the other sciences (physics, say) inasmuch as it studied “mental phenomena” instead of “physical phenomena.” Given this, Brentano is tasked with providing a characterization of mental phenomena. His answer is that a particular mental phenomenon, in Tim Crane’s words, “always contains an object within itself.”\(^2\) For example, all desires are desires for something: a new bike, another’s affection; all beliefs are a belief in something: that there is milk in the refrigerator, that *Cheers* is on the television. Physical phenomena are not like this. A rock is not about anything; it does not contain anything in this sense. Contemporary followers of Brentano put this point by saying that mental phenomena are best characterized in terms of their unique intentionality. When I ask, “What is experience about? What does it “contain?” as a way to construct of the content of experience, I too follow Brentano.

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\(^1\) Brentano 1874. Though note that the idea that mental states should be characterized in terms of the objects which they are about goes back to the ancient Greeks. Parmenides, e.g., held to an identity between what we can say, what we can think, and what there is. As he saw it, if there was no \(x\) there, then one could not be said to be thinking or saying anything when one used the term \(x\) in thought or speech.

\(^2\) Crane 2006, 26.
I am not unique on this point. Indeed, the bulk of the literature is in agreement about the centrality of intentionality in this debate. York Gunther, for instance, ostensibly characterizing the debate in general terms, says that intentionality is “the genus to which the conceptual and nonconceptual belong.”

But this agreement seems not to have gotten us very far. Not only is there no agreement about what kind of intentional content is needed to characterize the contents of experience. There doesn’t even seem to be a sufficient awareness of the fact that that any answer to the question of which kinds of intentional content are needed to characterize the contents of experience is dependent upon answering the prior question of what the objects of experience are. As I see it, we cannot expect to determine the nature of intentional content when we have not yet clearly identified what their aboutness is directed toward. I call this project determining the proper objects of experience. It is this issue which I think most deeply divides the followers of Brentano, and which will concern us here.

3.2 Experience: Four Views

That said, I propose that we examine the following four views about experience. These views differ from one another along two dimensions.

Most importantly for our intentionalist analysis, they differ in what each takes the proper objects of experience to be. It should be stated now that this selection cannot be claimed to be exhaustive of the types of objects that there are, a kind of complete list of metaphysically possible objects. Such a task would not only be extremely difficult, but

3 Gunther 2003, 4.
tangential to our task which is to identify the proper objects of experience and not objects *tout court*. The obvious question is, Which objects are the most salient choices to be possible proper objects of experience? The four views discussed below were chosen because they represent particularly salient positions in this debate over nonconceptual content.

The other dimension along which they differ concerns the sources and kinds of structure in experience given each proper object of experience. This is an important issue inasmuch as it is in considering these structural questions that the phenomenological and epistemological issues really come to light.

The four views I wish to consider are:

*The Mere Impingement View*

The proper objects of experience are the ultimate objects of a completed physics that impinge upon us in experience. Such impingements are “mere” because they are unstructured qua objects of experience.

*The Structured Impingement View*

The proper objects of experience are “structured impingements” in the form of phenomenal properties like redness or sweetness.

*The Conceptually Structured Presentation View*

The proper objects of experience are the everyday objects of our lives, cars, books, trees. The structure here is “non-natural-presenting-as.”
The Facts View

The proper objects of experience are the everyday states of the world (*facts* for short) such as its being the case that one is waiting at a bus stop, or that one’s mother is on the telephone. The structure is conceptual (in a sense that will be explored in the next chapter).

Let me make three quick points before we look at these views individually.

First, I see these views as further developments of the ones before them. The proper objects get more complex as one moves from the mere impingement view to the facts view.\(^4\) For this reason, I often call the first view the “minimal notion of experience” since the objects of experience are, as we will see, “fundamental.” The last view I often call the “robust notion of experience” since fact is a metaphysically rich notion. On the other hand, let’s be clear that just because the mere impingement view is minimal does not mean that it is not just as maximal theoretically as any of the other three. There’s nothing metaphysically innocent or obvious about *any* of these characterizations, regardless of their being more or less minimal with respect to each other. For that reason, there are no easy Occam’s-Razor-like arguments to be made here.

Second, it’s helpful to note that an interesting way to frame the development of these views is in terms of the *source* of systematicity in experience in each. The move here is from (1) mere impingements with no discernable systematicity, to (2) structured

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\(^4\) The relevant notion of complexity here is related to the notion of structure in the characterizations of experience that define each of the four views. If we think of phenomenology as the study of the structures of experience, then views which find little structure will find little to say that is truly phenomenological.
impingement due to the organization of the sensory organs, to (3) systematicity owing to socio-cultural norms governing object use, to, finally, (4) systematicity owing to an even broader range of socio-cultural norms. We’ll spell out these points in detail as we go along, so don’t worry if they don’t make sense right now.

Third, there will be two principle bases upon which we will judge each view: epistemological and phenomenological. Epistemological concerns have been behind the most influential conceptualist positions⁵ while the best nonconceptualist positions are driven, as we’ve seen in the previous chapter, by a desire for a sound phenomenology of experience. Both bases are important for me, all the more so since they are usually seen as pointing to opposite conclusions in the nonconceptual content debate.

3.3 The Mere Impingement View

As we will use the term here, an “impingement” is that which directly affects the experiencing subject causally. One can think of impingements as a very particular step in the causal chain between the experienced and the experiencer. In seeing a red ball, say, there exists a chain of causal connections between the properties that explain the ball’s ability to reflect light in the proper range to be perceived, the light itself being reflected toward my eye, the impact (or impingement) of the light on my retina, the mental processing going on inside my brain, and perhaps the presentation to consciousness of a red ball. The proper object of experience on this story is the impingement at the center of this causal chain.

What makes this a “mere” impingement? The answer is: a lack of discernable structure from the subject’s point of view. There is a sense in which the impingements, though they are the proper objects of experience, are transparent for the subject. A subject sees through the impingements to the object seen. They are mere, then, in that the properties of the impingements are unknown to the subject. Or at least, we should say, they are unknown to direct experience. That is, I take it that the mere impingements view finds the most adherents among the scientifically-minded theorists, and in particular those committed to an ultimate physical theory of everything as promised by a completed physics. The only way to characterize experience, on their view, is to characterize it by way of the properties of the impingements in a complete physics. I take it that much of what Robert Stalnaker says gives him a view along these lines, particularly inasmuch as he wants to maintain, as he puts it, that experience is “nonconceptual all the way up.”

As I stated earlier, views such as these should be tested against the concerns of other areas of study which put experience at their heart. Toward that end, let’s ask: What should the phenomenologist say about the mere impingements view.

The most pressing issue here is that it’s not at all clear that the mere impingement view can support a phenomenology. Since we have not yet achieved a completed physics, we simply cannot say what the objects of experience are precisely nor what it would mean for them to impinge upon us, qua subjects, in experience. That is, if mere impingements are only one part in a causal chain that we can’t yet understand, we have no choice but to admit that we do not really know what the proper objects of experience

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6 Stalnaker 1998, 106. Note that though I am not saying that Stalnaker would agree with this interpretation of his view, I would want to maintain that something like this is the consequence of his naturalist commitments when applied to questions of the content of experience.
are. Even if we think that we understand some of the properties of these impingements, we must reserve ultimate judgment until physics is in fact completed. As a result, we simply cannot say with any authority what it’s like to be us. The mere impingement theorist is forced into silence on the phenomenological issues. I take this to be a serious problem for the mere impingement theorist, and in particular for the phenomenologist who purports to hold to the kind of materialist metaphysics that underlies such views.

This is not to say that all mere impingement theorists are silent on phenomenological issues. Such thinkers could claim that we in fact do have phenomenological evidence, but that what we lack is the ability to put this evidence into perspective with what we know about the mind’s functioning. Theorists such as Stalnaker who talk with concern about “the way things seem” or “appearances” but then insist that only the content of mere impingements matter are in this camp. But this seems to me simply inconsistent for the intentionalist. As far as I can tell, a commitment to an explanation in terms of intentionality rules out the possibility that we could be said to not know what the proper objects of experience are but yet have something positive to say about the contents of our experience. In this way, a theorist who holds a mere impingements view must either reject that experience has proper objects that can be known phenomenally before the advent of the complete science or reject an intentional explanation of content. If this is right, then it is precisely here that we should recognize the true meaning and boldness of Paul Churchland’s eliminative materialist claims about

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7 Stalnaker does this by trying to find a place for appearances which is related to informational contents but, all the same, by insisting that all mental contents are “informational contents.”
experience. Churchland holds that we may in fact have no idea what it’s like to be us because we have no idea where science will end up.

Now, one might resist here. Churchland shouldn’t feel as if being an eliminativist makes him a quietist about the contents of experience. One can hold such a view and yet talk about visual illusions, e.g., as contents of experience. In fact, many feel that the study of visual illusions helps to make clear how the mind operates and thus what the contents of the mind are. But this, I want to say, is not really a commitment to the mere impingements view. If we say that the contents of our experiences are things like “looking like one line is longer than the other” (as we might characterize what we see in a Müller-Lyer illusion), then we are not in fact holding to the bald naturalist position since “lookings” are most definitely not going to be the final object of a completed (realist, i.e., non-idealist) science. At best, the phenomenological task is always secondary to the scientific task for the mere impingement theorist. The result is that there can be no phenomenological evidence but only phenomenological conclusions. But this seems to get things the wrong way around, both in the eyes of the phenomenologist and according to the approach argued for in this essay. From the perspective of the phenomenologist, mere impingement views are phenomenological non-starters.

One last point here: some may want to reply to what I have said here in the following way: you act as if you could compute from a theory of mind to its phenomenology, but how could this be so? If bald naturalism about the mind is correct

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8 Churchland 1979.
9 Thanks are due to Willem deVries for pressing me along these lines.
and we really don’t know what it’s like to be us, then so be it. This is precisely why we are doing philosophy.

There is something right in this line of thought. But I think it’s just wrong to say that we don’t know what it’s like to be us. This is to deny phenomenology any role in an account of the contents of experience. Of course, there are some accounts that are (perhaps) not at all affected by “what it’s like to be us.” Accounts of the neural underpinnings of consciousness, say. I do not think that an account of the contents of experience is one of these kinds of accounts, if for no other reason than that when we talk about experience we just are talking about what it’s like to be us. It is, I claim, definitional. And those who disagree owe us an account of how it could be otherwise.

Further, note that my claims are premised on the assumption that we’re talking here about characterizing the contents of experience in terms of the objects of knowledge. My argument is that if we take the objects of experience to be the still incomplete, fuzzy objects of quantum physics (for instance, though the point generalizes), we can only be clear as we are about the contents of experience as we are about them, which is to say hardly at all. This is both phenomenologically unsatisfying and implausible.

That said, let’s move on to a consideration of the epistemology of mere impingement. Putting experiential content beyond the pale of phenomenological analysis in the way of the mere impingement view is, it must be noted, an extreme and unusual view. Far from being unusual, however, many epistemologists have wanted to put experiential content beyond the pale of epistemological analysis. In fact, there is an influential tradition in philosophy of maintaining that our experience is “ineffable.” Such views are often associated with Eastern mysticism and religions, e.g. Zen Buddhism or
Taoism, where meditation is prized over cogitation. But they have their adherents in Western thought as well. C. I. Lewis, the modern father of “the Given” as, in Sellars’ phrase, a piece of “epistemological shoptalk,” has often been read as advocating the ineffability of experience. Here’s a passage from Lewis that seems to point in this direction.

While we can thus isolate the element of the given by these criteria of its unalterability and its character as sensuous feel or quality, we cannot describe any particular given as such, because in describing it, in whatever fashion, we qualify it by bringing it under some category or other, select from it, emphasize aspects of it, and relate it in particular and avoidable ways. If there be states of pure esthesis, in violent emotion or in the presence of great art, which are unqualified by thought, even these can be conveyed—and perhaps even retained in memory—only when they have been rendered articulate by thought. So that in a sense the given is ineffable, always. It is that which remains untouched and unaltered, however it is constructed by thought.¹⁰

There is a lot going on here, but the key thought is that the Given element in experience is beyond being “rendered articulate by thought.” Why should this be? Because in describing something we qualify it, and the Given is, by definition, unqualified, untouched and thus unsullied by the structures of knowledge. For Lewis, any and all articulation is, at best, distortion.

When Lewis wrote this, these sentiments would not have been unfamiliar to his readers. Indeed, Lewis could have counted on his audience’s familiarity with William James’ notion, in The Varieties of Religious Experience, that experience is a “buzzing, blooming confusion” to help frame these thoughts.¹¹ Insofar as that confusion makes any

¹⁰ Lewis 1929, 52–3.
¹¹ Indeed, at least one commentator on Lewis uses this phrase seemingly totally unreflectively as a way of distancing himself from this reading of Lewis’ position. He says, “It was supposed that the given must be something qualitative and simple; that it must be something cohesive and apparently imposed from outside; that it must be a buzzing, blooming confusion, a blind problem. On the contrary, the given, as
sense to us, this is because we have done something to it; we have made the ineffable effable, the unthinkable thinkable. But we can only have done so by distorting what is really there. Think of it this way: There are both advantages and disadvantages to this, the main advantage being that what is untouched by the structures of knowledge, as well as the practices of knowledge acquisition, are also free of their prejudices, misunderstandings, and in general inherent falsity and confusion. That is, for Lewis, only by being ineffable can the Given be a proper epistemological foundation.

This, I want to claim, is where the experience as mere impingement views leave us as well. Mere impingement *just is* a lack of discernable structure. The objects of experience impinge upon us, but it is wholly up to us to put these impingements into whatever coherent, thinkable, order that they have for us.

What sort of epistemology arises from holding that experience is a buzzing, blooming confusion? For Lewis, the task of the epistemologist is set by the implications of holding that all effability is due to the cognitive efforts of the subject in the process of what he called the “interpretation” of the buzzing, blooming confusion that is experience. We must conceive of interpretation as a process whereby what is “revealed” to us about the objects of the world through this buzzing, blooming confusion we call experience can still amount to knowledge. Putting it this way, however, makes clear what the problem I mean it, is very often highly structured and articulate...” (Williams 1933, 617–8). Williams, however, seems not to have embraced the full meaning of his differing view inasmuch as he argues for what he calls “the innocence of the given” whereby the given is “innocent” in the sense that

the givenness of a thing [is] neither equivalent nor necessary nor sufficient to knowledge about that thing. Phenomenological introspection, critical epistemology, and philosophical tradition all testify that the given is innocent and ambiguous, with the inscrutable ultimacy of sheer fact.” (627)

This, to my mind, makes the given just as ineffable as Williams sought to avoid it being at the start of his essay. Piatt, in his 1935, agrees with me.
with this view is: finding the necessary traction within the confusion to account for knowledge requires a degree of effable effability that is inconsistent with the confusion itself. I take it this is a way of capturing the issue at the heart of the contemporary discussion about “epistemic friction.” If there were no connection to the world, something that would provide the right kind of friction, then there could not be knowledge of the world. But where in the confusion of mere impingements is to be found the necessary friction?

There are two possibilities. Either the given is not so ineffable after all, and we can draw from experience how it presents the world to us, or we have some prior knowledge that we are said to have about the ways ineffable experience distorts effable reality. The first approach seems to be a straight contradiction of saying that experience is ineffable, and thus absurd for Lewis to maintain. The second must amount to nothing more than an appeal to another kind of Given, this time a priori knowledge of which interpretations better fit the world as given in experience. But then this is no good for Lewis either, really, because then it’s not really the case that experience is ineffable but that its effability needs to be decoded (as it were) by having the right interpretation. Either way, it can’t really be the case that experience is ineffable if it’s to play any role in the gaining of empirical knowledge.

If my understanding of the epistemology of the mere impingement view is correct, not only does the mere impingement view show itself to be a nonstarter for the phenomenologist but also for the epistemologist.

3.4 The Structured Impingement View
If impingement views are generally preferred by the more scientifically-minded, it must be said that one can hold to a generally scientific worldview and yet still maintain that there is *some* systematization in experience that we can make sense of without recourse to an ultimate physics. This is to say, we can trust our phenomenology to some degree. The question is, how much?

There are three notions which shape the central core of the structured impingement view. The first is the idea that experience comes in discrete packages of sensory information which we then “construct” in experience into the everyday objects around us. Hume called these little packets of unanalyzable structure “impressions,” though similar notions have been called “sense data,” “sensa,” and “sensations,” among other things. Impressions are impingements in the sense that they are still understood in causal terms; e.g., we smell the flower because it is giving off an odor which our sense organs are sensitive to, and because this odor has reached us. The odor impinges upon us. The idea is just that these impingements—which are the proper objects of experience—are structured by the sense organs *before* they enter into our experience. To put it another way, this view says that the objects of experience are *sense organ structured* impressions.

The second core idea is that impressions have phenomenal properties which are presented in experience to the subject. As a result of their being thus presented, we may not know what a particular smell is (what it is the smell of), but that it has certain phenomenal properties we do know. A smell might be sweet, flowery, rotten, salty, etc. These phenomenal properties are not derived in cognition, not the consequence of any
argument, reasoning, or cogitating, but are rather just there in our experience for the taking.

The third core idea is that the structured impingements are presented to experience as a systematic whole. This can be read in two ways; either (1) sense organ structured impingements are presented sights, sounds, smells, etc., and in this sense they are structured by the individual sense organs; or (2) the sense organs work together to create a sensory field of sights, sounds, smells, etc. and this sensory field is presented to the subject. Though there are interesting differences here, I believe that what I have to say about the experience as structured impingement view is general enough to cover both readings.\(^\text{12}\)

Now, why would anyone hold structured impingement view? There are no doubt many reasons, and we’ll explore some of the phenomenological and epistemological ones below. But let’s answer this question by discussing the reasons to prefer this more robust view of experience to the minimal characterization of experience as mere impingement.

Chief among these reasons is a rejection of the reductionist scientism of the mere impingement view. If we can talk about at the level of the operations of the sense organs in a naturalistic characterization of the contents of our experience, we should do so. Our sense organs play a ubiquitous but implicit role in our characterizations of what we perceive.\(^\text{13}\) No one fails to understand why we teach children to look both ways before crossing the street. What we experience (or, I guess we should say, fail to experience by

\(^{12}\) Actually there’s a third reading here as well, a kind of middle position between the two just outlined. It may be that each sensory organ presents its own field, and that these distinct fields are combined in cognition to form the understanding’s equivalent to a true sensory field. What I have to say about structured impingement views in general covers this possibility as well.

\(^{13}\) …in the sense that they and their particular natures show up in characterizations of experience all of the time.
always looking both ways before crossing the street) is very much influenced by the ways in which we situate our bodies, and in particular our sense organs, with respect to the world around us. Though we may not often include explicit descriptions of our sense organs in our characterizations of our experiences, we all clearly have a robust sense of how our sense organs function so as to bring the world into focus for us through experience.

As a part of this, it just seems to be the case that characterizations of our experiences make necessary reference to something like impressions. We talk about sights, sounds, and smells, but not at all about buzzing, blooming mere impingements. Indeed, it’s not at all clear that someone who is committed to the mere impingement view could even buy in to what I agreed with Bermúdez (in Ch. 1) was an assumption of the nonconceptual debate in the first place: that we are trying to characterize experience as it is had by actual, particular subjects. If mere impingements are beneath the level of awareness, then to suggest that they are the proper objects of experience is to suggest that experience is beneath the level of awareness. Even if there are subconscious processes which affect experience, surely it is absurd to say that experience itself could be subconscious.¹⁴ This is just to reiterate the consequence of adopting a view which leaves no room for phenomenological facts.

At any rate, let’s turn now to specific phenomenological and epistemological accounts of the structured impingement view. We’ll take the phenomenological issues first.

¹⁴ This is not to say that elements of experience couldn’t be subconscious (if there is such a thing). But I would insist that such elements are not themselves experienced. They would rather be elements of experience in the same sense that eggs are elements of a cake. They are necessary for the production of the whole, but our experience is of the whole itself.
If it is impressions that are given in experience, then what we need to do is to characterize

(1) what it’s like to be given such things

(2) given the kind of experiencing and knowing subject that we must thereby be.

For Hume—an important father of both empiricism as well as conceptual atomism and abstractionism,\(^{15}\) a prime example of an impression is a blue patch. It is, for Hume, a blue patch with a very particular shade of blueness, for, on his official view, it is only insofar as we have previously seen a particular shade of blueness, let’s call it blue\(_{39}\), that we have the concept of that particular shade of blue.\(^{16}\) Other examples of an impression include all sorts of simple sounds (A#, the sound of a trumpet, the sound of wind rushing past one’s ears, etc.), simple smells (like the smell of ginger root, or rotting flesh), along with simple feels (velvet between one’s toes) and tastes (garlic ice cream).

I stress the simplicity of impressions (or sensations or sense data) inasmuch as there is another side to these stories which leads us (as it did Hume before us) to contrast

\(^{15}\) Abstractionism is the view that concepts are formed atomistically and by abstraction from what we sense. The now classic critique of concept abstractionism is Geach’s 1957. It’s also worth noting here that Geach holds the concepts as capacities view that will play a central role in the discussion of the next chapter of this work.

\(^{16}\) I say that this was his “official” position because, famously, he thought that it was likely that a person who had never seen a certain shade of blue (what has come to be called in the literature “the missing shade of blue”) would yet still “raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade.” This is serious problem for his official position and apologists have taken it upon themselves to defend Hume’s official position from this aberration ever since. (See A Treatise of Human Nature (Hume 1739–40), p. 6 and ff. The apologist I have in mind here is David Pears in his 1990, where he holds that Hume must abandon conceptual atomism so as to save his empiricism.)
the simple impressions with more complex ones which are formed from them. For instance, no one would deny that we see books, houses, and trains, hear Mozart scherzos, smell baking bread, feel the rough pavement beneath our feet, etc. But these kinds of complex impressions hardly seem like the type of thing that our sense organs could detect, and thus present to us as objects in experience. That is, complex, real world objects are not objects of experience on the structured impingement view as long as we hold the structuring to be only sense-structuring.

In response to what to do about real world objects (or what are more often called “middle sized dry goods”) many have adopted a kind of “representationalism” about the objects of experience. On the views I have mind, to see a book is to experience the simple impressions which the book causes in us (the blueness of its cover, its rectangular shape from this angle, etc.). The book, as a middle sized dry good of worldly consequence, is, strictly speaking, only a representation constructed out of the proper objects of experience.

But this view (and perhaps all representationalist views to the extent that they fit this picture) suffer to some extent as phenomenological views. The problem we face again and again is this: How do we reconstruct the phenomenology of our complex experience given only the set of simples out of which that experience is to be built? To be sure, this is not an ontological thesis. That is, no one is saying that there aren’t really

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17 Note that we might prefer to call these more complex impressions “ideas” which would express the view that they are constructed better than calling them impressions. This was Hume’s view. I’m not worried about this point, however, and so won’t be as careful, though nothing in my argument against this view relies on the looseness of my usage here.

18 The commonsense view on this is called by philosophers “realism” about the objects of our experience. The view is often taken to amount to a denial of “representationalism” about the objects of experience where what we experience are representations of the objects of knowledge (i.e., the physical objects of the world) and not the objects themselves.
books but only mere simples. This is rather a thesis about the contents of experience. Note also that this is a prior and separate question to the epistemological question, How do we come to have knowledge of complex objects and not just the simple properties of objects as presented to sense qua proper object of experience? For convenience, let’s call this the problem of recapturing the world.

James saw that the problem of recapturing the world was a serious one. As one commentator put it, the problem is “how to reclaim experience as a meaningful unitary whole” once we have broken it up along the lines of our senses. ¹⁹ Indeed, this problem loomed so large for James that it was his way of solving it—or, rather, his way of sidestepping it—that made his late empiricism “radical.” On his view, not only are impressions objects of experience but so are the relations between impressions. Including such relations is supposed to explain how experience can be a flux, presumably since we can start to make sense of how impressions fit together into objects inasmuch as we can track how impressions relate to one another.

I’ll set aside here the question of whether or not James’ position is successful. For all its problems not withstanding, the structured impingement view is much more plausible than mere impingement view when it comes to phenomenological issues, especially to the extent that the latter leads to eliminativism and a skeptical phenomenology. Consider, for example, how natural is the thought in this passage from Lewis:

At the moment, I have a fountain pen in my hand. When I so describe this item of my present experience, I make use of terms whose meaning I have learned. Correlatively I abstract this item from the total field of my present

consciousness and relate it to what is not just now present in ways which I have learned and which reflect modes of action which I have acquired. … A savage in New Guinea, lacking certain interests and habits of action which are mine, would not so classify it. There is, to be sure, something in the character of this thing as a merely presented colligation of sense-qualities which is for me the clue to this classification or meaning; but that just this complex of qualities should be due to a "pen" character of the object is something which has been acquired. Yet what I refer to as "the given" in this experience is, in broad terms, qualitatively no different than it would be if I were an infant or an ignorant savage.20

There seems to be something deeply right about this. What grounds do we have for holding there to be any difference between my experience of holding a pen in my hand and the experience of an infant or “ignorant savage” doing the same? If we cannot find any good reason to deny this, then the structured impingement view could look to be our best position on what the objects of experience are, and thus on what we are qua experiencers.

As I see it, then, structured impingement views have a serious problem when it comes to their phenomenological accounts: the problem of recapturing the world. But this has not kept them from exerting their influence on philosophers, no doubt because of their prima facie plausibility as captured so forcefully by Lewis. The question is, does that plausibility vanish once pressure is exerted?

Now, what about the epistemology of the structured impingement view? Does it too seem prima facie plausible? I don’t think so.

Empiricist epistemologists have sometimes been convinced that structured impingement views must be right. When one is seeking the most basic elements of experience that are, at the same time, of any empirical significance, it makes sense that

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20 Lewis 1929, 49–50.
one would focus on those elements of experience which tap directly into the most basic properties of objects from the perspective image of the manifest image: phenomenal properties. The *phenomenalism* of Carnap and Ayer is a logical consequence of their radical, yet scientific, empiricism.\(^{21}\)

What makes a structured impingement view so troublesome for the epistemologist, however, is that it requires discussion of a *fidelity inference*. By “fidelity inference” I mean an inference which would prove, beyond a shadow of a (Cartesian) doubt, that our senses are true to *us* and not “cheating” on us with some evil demon, or just simply not playing along with us in our effort to acquire knowledge. Since we do not want to be stuck saying that we know blue patches, C#, etc., but rather books which are blue, songs which have C#s in them, etc., the objects of experience cannot be the objects of knowledge on the structured impingement view. The problem is, how are we justified in believing that the objects of knowledge are correctly constructed from the objects of experience?\(^{22}\)

So, fine: the structured impingement theorist is forced to address the question of fidelity. Why has this been so difficult? The problem here is, as one might guess, a version of the problem James raises, only specifically epistemological in scope. Since we only have access to the sense-datum in experience (since they are the proper objects of experience), we have to recapture in our talk of sense data all that we take ourselves to know in the more commonsense picture of ourselves as knowers of the world. This sets a methodological requirement on the construction of objects of knowledge from the objects

\(^{21}\) Carnap 1928; Ayer 1952.

\(^{22}\) Hume, Carnap, and Quine undertook the project that I am describing here.
of experience which is ultimately phenomenological in nature. We should not be told what the objects of knowledge are on the basis of what this or that theory of experience tells us they are. We experience the world as we do and it is us that determines what it is that we have knowledge of, us that determines whether or not we lack it.

This is highly theoretical, but it has practical and obvious consequences. I know that the apartment building across from my window is not, like the fake barns in Fake Barn County, an apartment façade. It is an actual apartment building, with tenants who reside inside it. But do I ever see this about the apartment on the structured impingement view? No. All I see is the side facing me at any given time. (This needn’t be a skeptical point, note. I’m not saying that we can’t do better here in making sense of how the objects of experience can be constructed into the objects of knowledge.) What are we to do about this if we claim that it is building which we experience and know?

One popular response would be to rely on the fact that I have walked around the apartment, perhaps even been inside it. From these past experiences I have constructed this object (as I’m looking at it now) as an object of experience which is greater than the sum of its currently presented parts. I see the apartment building now because I have seen its occluded sides in the past. An obvious problem with this, however, is what are we to say happens when I take a stroll through a new place for me? Can the objects of experience no longer be the objects of knowledge for me simply because I have not been there before, walked around all the buildings to see that they are not mere façades? This seems silly.

The reply is to say that it isn’t because I have walked around the buildings that they can be objects of knowledge for me, but because I could do so. That is, perhaps the
problem is in understanding the process of construction (or reconstruction) to be static and, relatedly, experience and knowledge to be revisable. Another way to put this point is to say that the objects of knowledge are such for me precisely because they are counterfactually supported by my attempts to differentiate between them and the mere objects of my experience qua sense-structured.

This certainly sounds more plausible, but to my ears at least it gains its plausibility by abandoning its theoretical soul. The counterfactual supports posited here are not elements of a subject’s visual experience on the structured impingement view. They are, at best, either facts about the world or some kind of (implicit or explicit) knowledge had by a subject.

A line of thought that assumes the former is this. Impressions are related to each other in patterns which are intimately connected to the positioning of our sense organs’ (and thus a subject’s positioning) in space. At any given space seen (or, more generally, experienced, though we’ll stick to the visual analogy for now) from a particular point and at a particular time, the sense impressions that I am presented with are related to each other in intricate ways. These will be understood by me to be tables, books, etc., but only once construction has taken place. Similarly, what is presented at any given time will be related to what is presented at other times, in ways that will be understood by me, to the back and undersides of tables and books, etc. But again, the systematic relations between the presentations of objects as we move exist in the world and its relations to subject’s qua physically embedded perceivers. They are no more an element in experience on the structured impingement view than are the tables and books that are eventually constructed. The second view, that the counterfactual supports are knowledge had by the
subject, is more plausible. Alva Noë has a view like this. But these counterfactual supports are not, on Noë’s view, elements in a sense-structured impingement view. Precisely not, for Noë’s goal is to argue against a kind of impingement view that he calls the “snapshot conception” of visual experience on the grounds that knowledge of these counterfactual supports and how to exploit them in action is necessary for perception. At any rate, it looks as if both of these positions on the status of counterfactual supports is beyond the pure structured impingement theorist.

Now of course there is much more to say here; there are many ways in which the fidelity inference can be constructed, and then many ways that each of these inferences can address or fail to address the needs of the reconstructing project as determined by the particular conception of the impressions provided by experience on a sense structured view. There are a truly great number of possibilities to consider here. I hope this general sketch (along with the problems that I will raise in the next few sections) will suffice to convince my readers that the structured impingement view of experience is problematic enough to warrant strong efforts to avoid holding it, despite any prima facie plausibility it may have as a phenomenological account, or any prompting we may feel to move toward it in our efforts to be “good empiricists.”

3.5 The Conceptually Structured Presentation View

In the course of the discussion so far, the problem of ensuring the fidelity of experience has—through the Jamesian notion of a problem of recapturing the

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23 Noë 2005. One has to be careful with this point. Noë talks about sensorimotor knowledge had by the perceiver, but would not want to say that sensorimotor knowledge could be cashed out in terms of counterfactuals if we conceive of them as propositions.

24 See Ch. 2 of Noë 2005.
world—turned into a question about how it is that we can be assured that the objects of experience are suitably identical to the objects of knowledge. This makes sense when we recall that it is *empirical* knowledge that we are concerned with when discussing the place of experience in gaining knowledge. We want to understand experience’s role in the *fact* that our thought *is* about the world, not answer the skeptical challenge that it might have no such role to play after all.

Putting the issue this way, though, suggests to us another problem that must be discussed, a problem that further complicates the issues that, as I’ve argued, seriously threaten the structured impingement view. The problem is that it isn’t just objects *qua* three-dimensional that are the objects of knowledge. Oftentimes, to know an object is to know it *as* something. The question is, Is the *as* character of knowing a product of our cognizing alone, such that it is only in knowing an object that it *has* an as character? Or do we not rather experience the as character in (as it were) the object itself? *It is the as character of objects in our experience (in our thought, perception, and action) that dictates both the conditions of necessity of the notion of the conceptual in an account of mental content as well as the details of its conception as a theoretical postulate.*

But there are intuitive limits to conceptualization in the form of limits on the holistic nature of understanding. Most pressingly, there is the problem of origins. This has both interpretational and conceptual versions. Not all things, it seems, can be known, experienced, thought, etc., only insofar as they have an *as character*, for then it would be unclear how the processes of interpretation—processes adopted from Lewis and thus a

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25 This is a general methodological statement not only for the conceptual presentation theorist but also for the conceptualist position as I understand it. At the same time, the nonconceptualist shouldn’t have a problem with it. Acceptance of this principle leaves open the possibility that not all experience is experience as.
relic of the structured impingement view generally—could get off the ground. Similarly, assuming that concepts account for the as character of objects in experience, it seems unclear how concepts could come to be formed if to have one is to have them all. If we see both problems as problems of the origins of primitive modes of understanding, interpretational holism goes hand in hand with conceptual holism. And seeing them as thus related is further justified by the fact that both views (interpretational holism and conceptual holism) come under fire from the same quarters, and for the same reasons.

With this in mind, recall that the conceptually structured presentation view is the view that (1) the proper objects of experience are the everyday objects of our lives and (2) that the structure found in such experiences is “non-natural-presenting-as.”

By (1) I mean that it is the trees themselves, books themselves, cars themselves, that are best called the proper objects of experience as opposed to the sensible properties of these objects in the form of impressions or the atoms, etc., which physically make up these objects. We can also say that on this view middle sized dry goods are the proper objects of experience.

With (2) I say something about what kind of structure is found in experience. As I’ll put it, objects are experienced as culturally articulated, first of all, which is to say that a characterization of them requires reference to cultural, and thus non-natural, facts. To see a school bus, for instance, is to see something that plays a certain role in our culture. Such structures are “presentations” instead of impingements, however, since they are not to be (cannot be) described in natural, causal terms, and yet seemingly must be described

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26 This isn’t quite the best way to put this point. Taking a natural fact to be what I’ll call later, after Searle, a brute fact, natural facts can be cultural facts, but not vice versa. See §4.2.
as suitably passive *presentings* of social facts as opposed to *constructings* as give the structured impingement view so much trouble.

This is extremely compressed, but the details will come out in a consideration of the epistemological and phenomenological accounts of the conceptual presentation view. Let’s buck the established protocol, however, and talk about the epistemology of the conceptual presentation view first and then move to a discussion of its phenomenology. This order suggests itself because it is, on my view, the phenomenology of the structured impingement view that is harder to give up. This is a function of its *prima facie* plausibility. On top of that, we ended our discussion of structured impingement hungry for an alternative to the failed epistemology that it implies. So let’s get straightaway to the epistemology of the conceptual presentation view.

The key insight behind the epistemology of the conceptual presentation view is that knowledge of an object must include an *as* element. The idea is that to know an object is to know it *as* something. But, in order that the fidelity inference have less work to do, we also want to say that we know objects as something insofar as we experience objects as something. Let’s expand these ideas.

What do we mean by knowing an object *as* something? As I see it, there are a great many things (potential objects of knowledge) where I think we would say that to know them is to know the *kind of thing* that it is. How exactly this second element is in itself to be understood (i.e., what it is to be a kind of thing) is a complicated affair, but,
roughly, a thing’s type is determined by the culture wherein its origins are to be traced.\(^7\)

To see what I mean, consider the following scenario.

Imagine an iPod beamed back to early 17\(^{th}\) century Austria, materializing one evening on the King’s nightstand. Say he finds it the next morning. Would he know what it was? Who would he contact to tell him? And what would they say? Would anyone ever come to know what it was? If so, how would they do so? If not, if they failed to ever get it right, or at least guess that it was, say, a storage device of some kind, or, more exactingly, that it stored music, then I think we would want to say that the knowledge of what this object was would not have been gained in the 17\(^{th}\) century. This is true, I would maintain, even if they knew of it that it was white on one side, that it was an artifact, and not a natural object, made of some kind of metal, and that once, for a brief period of 14 or so hours after its appearance, it displayed the name of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart along with such strange words as “Pearl Jam” and “Megadeth” when manipulated in ways since forgotten.\(^8\) In these cases, we would say that they knew about the iPod in some ways. But this would not, I think we would agree, qualify as knowledge in the sense that those in our linguistic community know it. We know what it is and they know that it is something to be known which they have not figured out.

\(^7\) As a definition of “kind,” this is only true of objects which have an origin in the works of man, i.e., artifacts. As an epistemological concept, however, “kind” also includes such things as the uses to which a natural kind thing is put. For example, a tree does not have origins in any particular culture. But if someone did not know of trees that they were used to make paper, park benches, etc., we should be hesitant to say of them that they know trees as culturally articulated.

\(^8\) Actually I think this could be a very fun story to write. The premise strikes me as similar to a Stanislaw Lem short story (particularly something from his Star Diaries (Lem 1971), and recalls Wells’ “Time Machine” (1895) where the traveler finds a race of people who would no longer recognize a book as something which holds the thoughts of men and women past.
I take it that these remarks go some way toward showing what the conceptual presentation view is in response to; since knowledge is culturally articulable through the having of an as element, experience, as a source of knowledge, must be culturally articulable as well. This point is particularly easy to discern when we’re talking about things like iPods and other artifacts, but I take it to hold more generally than that. Knowing a tree does not as obviously include a social element, though on reflection the *as element* seems to be just as important. One can’t be said to know a tree if one doesn’t see it as something in the world, a plant, say, or perhaps just a substance. But then the place of the cultural can be discerned by asking questions like, In what sense does one know what a tree is if one does not know it as something that children climb, something that desks are made of, something one could use to build a fire, or at least as something that one treats in a way that anyone could similarly treat it as? The same could be asked about rocks, inasmuch as we wouldn’t want to say that one saw a rock unless one saw something, for instance, that had little to no value, that presumably broke off from some bigger rock, etc. When objects have a cultural significance—and the challenge is to find an object that does not—inasmuch as to know them is to know *of* that significance, then the as element *is* cultural even in the absence of a culture to which the supposed knower belongs.

There are other epistemological reasons to prefer the conceptual presentation view, however, besides pointing to a special kind of object of knowledge which seems to require an as element. These are easier to grasp when we see how they arise from considerations of the details of the structured impingements view. If the objects of experience are conceptual presentations, as opposed to structured impingements, then the
problem that James posed for classical atomistic empiricist accounts such as Hume’s (the problem of recapturing the world) is made much more tractable. Certain hard problems of how it is that we construct the world from impressions fall away once we say that it is not just, e.g., the facing sides of objects qua sensible-at-a-time that are the proper objects of experience, but the objects themselves.

Believing as much needn’t mean that theorists who hold to this way of thinking can’t accommodate the commonsensical view that there is some sense in which we only perceive the top of a table that we are seated at. This is surely right. But the question is, Does only perceiving the top of the table mean that the table itself is not experienced by me? I don’t see why it should. We could just as easily say that I see a table that has its top facing me. The main difference here, it seems to me, would be between those that prefer to think of perception as a purely “natural,” having only or mostly to do with light rays hitting retinas, etc., and those that put perception in terms of how we think about and/or talk about objects. And these are not obviously purely or mostly physical processes.

At any rate, as we’ve seen, attempts to construct a framework of counterfactual supports fails in the sense that it does not stay true to the spirit of the structured impingement view. We can see the conceptual presentation view as a response to this problem: if experience is experiencing as, then we don’t have to make sense of how sense data are structured so as to capture our talk of seeing tables when we’re only physically affected at any given time by a side of it. The conceptual presentation view, then, respects our untutored intuitions about what it’s like to experience the world of things.

In its epistemological implications the conceptual presentation view is a marked improvement, then. If it’s things like tables, chairs, books, and trees that are the objects of
knowledge and also the objects of experience, then we can remove the burden of bringing them together with a fidelity inference. Indeed, perhaps, we might think, we can even do away with the need for the fidelity inference—as long as there are no other objects of knowledge besides tables, chairs, books, and trees. This is only one half of the equation in favor of the conceptual presentation view, however, for we’ve also seen how it can deal with the notion that we experience tables, chairs, books and trees, but also iPods as objects with cultural significance. In this sense, the notion of something as has both a socio-cultural aspect and a semantical-phenomenological aspect. Both of these aspects together work to make the conceptual presentation view plausible from the standpoint of an epistemologist concerned with keeping the “empiricism” in empirical knowledge.

Of course it’s not that easy, however. There are two difficult problems that the epistemologist of the conceptual presentation view needs to face.

The first is that even within the scope of empirical knowledge, there seem to be proper objects of knowledge that are not captured by the conceptual presentation view. My concern here is for the status of states of the world. If we know states of the world but do not experience them, we are once again in need of a fidelity inference.

The second problem is that it posits an unworkable distinction between the interpretative and un-interpretative (or given) elements of experience that undercuts the status of all knowledge derived from experience on the conceptual presentation view. We’ll explore this first problem in a few sections hence, when we discuss the reasons for moving toward the facts view. For now, let’s examine the second problem.

What is a state of the world? At least part of what is meant by “state of the world” is that which can be captured by a “that clause.” For example, that the cat is on the mat, that snow is white, that a semi is speeding toward you, that you’ll get hit unless you move out of its way, etc.
It’s important to see that conceiving experience as conceptual presentation lightens the load we must place on the fidelity inference to some extent, but it does not eliminate it. Why not? Because we can always ask, What is it that ensures that one’s conceptual response to the presentations is tuned (in an epistemically relevant sense) to how the world in fact is, and not on just any particular occasion, but on every occasion? 

Typically there are three responses that have been offered as an answer to this question. (1) Some have accepted their fate and tried to construct an inference that would do the job. (2) Others have tried to lower the threshold of knowledge and say that we have to make due with whatever presentations can do for us (since we cannot go further than them). (3) Still others have claimed that the presentations give us all we need because there is something about the presentations which brings them up to our normal standards of knowledge acquisition. The first approach is akin to rationalism; we can reason our way to accepting that what we experience is representative of what is. The second approach is that taken by coherentists, since their claim is that the coherence of a set of experiences is all that can be reasonable asked for it to prove itself a valuable source of knowledge. The third is what we can call “Givenism” in recognition of the epistemologies of C. I. Lewis and the subsequent attacks on that notion in the writings of Wilfrid Sellars. 

I hope I don’t have to say too much about why we should reject epistemic coherentism. And I take it that much of my discussion in this chapter has been in

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30 This distinction is held on to inasmuch as the view includes within it the idea that only some (not all) of our experiences are conceptual presentations.

31 Lewis 1929; Sellars 1956.
response to the “rationalist” conception of experience and knowledge. But why should Givenism be a problem?

As Sellars describes it, the myth of the Given is in thinking that something which is outside of our system of justification (what Sellars calls “the space of reasons”) can, despite this fact, come tagged with justificatory (or reason-giving) force. The myth is that this could happen. The challenge is that it could not. But why not? Sellars’ argument here is complex, and has been extended in various directions. But at its heart it has to do with the nature of the conceptual qua normative system. On Sellars’ view, central to any normative system is the possibility of rational engagement with even the most foundational of its structures. This isn’t so much because of the post-structuralist concern with everything being up for grabs, where all is “interpretation.” It’s because it makes no sense to say that there are parts of a normative system which are beyond the gaze of rational consideration. That is, we may, as a matter of fact, never assent to the idea that the world does not exist. But it is because we can, as it were, place this thought under the harsh light of rational consideration that we can grasp what it means at all. Our understanding of this thought goes hand in hand with our being able to question it. But it precisely our ever being able to question it which is ruled out by the Givenist.

This point needs expanding. Central to Givenism is the idea that some things are provided to us in experience which, while they speak to our conceptual capacities, are not in any sense structured by them. McDowell, in his discussion of Givenism, puts the point by saying that the Myth of the Given is the idea that the space of concepts extends more
widely than the space of reasons.\textsuperscript{32} The connection between McDowell’s way of putting the myth of the given and my way is this. The myth of the given is that something could play a role in the normative system which is the space of reasons without being subject to any of the constitutive rules or practices of the game of giving and asking for reasons.

On my view, close examination of the Given in light of the nature of the space of reasons reveals it to be unintelligible. McDowell offers what might be seen to be a more substantive response to the Givenist, however, so let me mention that as well. On McDowell’s view, the problem with Givenism is that “it offers exculpations where what we wanted was justifications.”\textsuperscript{33} The idea is more epistemological than I think we should frame the issue, but it’s worth understanding McDowell’s point here. As an example, think of yourself waking up a few miles into North Korean territory. You have no idea how you got there; you never once considered going there, never even visited the Korean peninsula as far as you know. You might then feel a sense of injustice when, after being found and detained by the North Koreans you were then tried and sentenced for spying. “Wait,” you might say at your trial, “I have no idea how I got here. I just woke up here. But if that’s true, then I couldn’t be a spy. You have to let me go!” But here’s the problem; you have offered them no reasons for your being there. You simply are and can say nothing else. But there is no room for dealing with a person who simply finds herself in a situation that would normally require an explanation. If the North Koreans are playing fair (and we can say for the example that they would), then your lack of ability to

\textsuperscript{32} McDowell 1994/1996, 6.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, 13.
provide anything more than an excuse places you outside the sphere of responsibility such that there are no clear grounds for how they should treat you.

The supposed given elements of experience face the same problem. Since they offer only exculpations and not justifications, we cannot (by definition) see how it is that they could relate to the rest of the conceptual framework so central to our thinking. At the same time, however, the Givenist is suggesting that these elements should fit into that normative system all the same. In the North Korean case, the problem is trying to make sense of an action where no one can be said to be the actor. The North Koreans face a situation of dealing with the consequences of a happening that can only be an action (i.e., someone must have put me there if I did not do it myself) but where no one (rightfully, let us say) can be said to have acted inasmuch as to act is to be related to the space of reasons in such a way that it’s place in the space of reasons can be examined. In the case of the Given in the Sellarsian sense, the problem is trying to make sense of a happening that must only be a perception (qua empirical act) but where no one (again, rightfully) can be said to have perceived inasmuch as to perceive is to be related to the space of reasons in a way such that its place in the space of reasons can be examined.

Now, it should be noted that there is substantial disagreement over the place of the Given in knowledge. Many epistemologists find the Sellarsian line here unconvincing, and propose a place for the Given in epistemology. Let me give you three examples. James Pryor (in Pryor 2005, which is a discussion about justification) has recently taken up the question of what to say about Davidson’s by-now famous dictum that the only thing that can justify a belief is another belief. He disagrees, and argues that there is in fact a Given, if by “Given” we mean experiences which “aren’t the sort of
thing which \textit{could be}, nor do they need to be justified."^{34} Alex Byrne (in Byrne 2005) argues that experiences do not justify beliefs. The upshot is this: If experiences do not justify beliefs, then the question of their conceptuality is beside the point. By separating the connection between the epistemological and the ontological issues, Byrne makes the epistemological reason for adopting conceptualism irrelevant. Ernest Sosa (in Sosa 1980) argues for a Given by arguing that while coherentists may not need such a notion foundationalists are \textit{committed} to adopting it. But then since coherentism is unsatisfactory (as he argues, and to put it simply, coherence can never give us justification, but justification is necessary for knowledge, so coherentism must be wrong), we must accept foundationalism and thus a Given.

What can we say in response to these very different arguments for the Given? In response to Pryor: Not even Sellars wants to deny that there is a perfectly innocent sense in which there is a Given in knowledge which we should understand in terms of non-inferential belief based on what we experience. Sellars, then, denies the Davidsonian view that only another belief can justify a belief (what Pryor calls the \textquotequotetext{Only Beliefs Premise’}) as well. Now, it may be that Pryor makes his non-inferential Given more robust than the innocent Given that Sellars endorses. But if so that’s another issue and does not diminish the fact that Sellars can agree with what I take to be Pryor’s more minimal point: that we need (a have) a non-inferential source of justification in the minimal sense.

^{34} To make his point, he asks us: \textquotequotetext{If someone comes up to you and demands \textit{How dare you have that experience? What gives you the right?} \textit{what would you say?}} (Pryor 2005, 189). The suggestion is that there is nothing to say; that the question itself is out of order.
In response to Byrne: I think it’s much too reversionary to say that experiences do not justify beliefs (either that or it’s much too Davidsonian). If the claim that, in general, experiences justify beliefs generalizes claims like “I believe there’s a tree there because I see a tree there,” I have a very hard time understanding Bryne’s thought here. It might be that Byrne is thinking of the content of experiences as a representationalist would, and thus is seeing experiences as just more representations for the knowing mind to work with when trying to know the world. But, as I see it, it is precisely inasmuch as experiences are of the world itself that they act as justifiers to certain of our beliefs. Bryne’s commitment to representationalism, it seems to me, has forced him to deny the obvious fact that experiences do justify beliefs and amounts to a modus tollens of his representationalism.

In response to Sosa, if there is an innocent notion of the Given as Pryor suggests, then there is room for a Sellarsian foundationalism when it comes to the contents of experience. This may not solve the skeptical problems that drive the epistemologist, but the point is that recognizing the possibility of such a position shows that Sosa sets up a false dichotomy. It simply isn’t the case that one must either be a coherentist or believe in the Given in Sellars’s sense.

Let’s turn now to the phenomenology of the conceptual presentation view. I said near the start of this section that the phenomenology of the structured impingement view is harder to give up than its epistemology because of its prima facie plausibility. We do tend to think of things like blue patches, C#s, and velvety feels as paradigmatic objects of experience. The philosophical notion of what-it-feels-like (to be a bat, to be a spider, to be you or me) is often put just in structured impingement terms, as are many
commonsense ways of talking about what it is to experience the world in seeing, hearing, feeling, etc.

But we started to move away from this view the moment we started saying that it is not just blue patches etc. which are experienced but middle-sized dry goods. A simple and obvious reason is that books are not the kinds of things that, on the structured impingement view considered here, can be objects of experience, since the structure is and must be relative to the functioning of the sense organs as such. Holding that rays of light, sound waves, etc., are the proper objects of experience makes impossible recognizing as experienceable the middle-sized dry goods that surround us. Thus holding this view makes necessary a story about how we construct the world that we interact with, not just an epistemological story, but a plausible phenomenological story as well.

This has proven extremely difficult. I think ultimately this has to do with our lack of ability to articulate our experience in the way that the sense-structured impingement view would have it. Take, e.g., Marr’s theory of vision or the indeterminacy arguments against conceptualism explored in Chapter 2. Marr\textsuperscript{35} may have given us a workable theory of how the senses work qua mechanism, but his project makes for a very poor phenomenology. There is no sense in which the calculating of distances or the overlaying of the different dimensions of color perception is part of what it’s like to see from the point of view of the subject. Marr, of course, recognizes this; he doesn’t want to say that we direct or even know what our eyes do when we see. But this, then, places those mechanisms out of the sphere of the cognitive for us (as an object of experience, though clearly not something abstract that we can know about ourselves). It is on similar grounds

\textsuperscript{35} Marr 1982.
that the pro-NCC arguments from §2.6 of this essay fail when they point out that though
we cannot quantify the distance between ourselves and, say, our far bedroom wall, we
nevertheless see that distance as determinate. While this is surely right, it needn’t have
the consequences for us that it is often taken to have; concepts can be determinate too.
(Think of the standard “that shade” or demonstrative concepts response here.)

What does the phenomenology of conceptual presentation add to the mix? And
does it offer us a better phenomenology than structured impingement views? What it adds
to the mix is the idea that experiencing is experiencing as. In particular, experiencing as
means experiencing the middle sized dry goods around us as objects of a particular type.
This is important phenomenologically because only if we recognize this fact can we take
account of certain Heideggerian points. It is central to Heidegger’s thought that the world
has a kind being-for-us that is relative to our capacities as perceivers, thinkers,
understanders, and, most importantly, actors. When I walk into a room, I do not scan the
room and then conceptualize the objects in it (like the Terminator is conceived of as
doing when he walks into a room). I rather walk in, sit down, and spread my books before
me all in anticipation of getting down to some reading. Objects have a being-for-us to the
degree that they blend into the everyday background of our lives. We often (and, the view
is, necessarily) don’t realize the extent to which we fail to think of some objects at all
anymore in the normal course of our striving to meet goals characterizable at a much
more abstract level of description.

This familiarity with objects breeds not contempt but a comfort with our world
that is threatened when said objects suddenly fail to afford those same possibilities of
acting. We say that a chair affords us sitting, and we take this to be an accurate (if
cryptic) account of the phenomenology of experiencing a chair in the course of our daily activities. We don’t see an object, deduce that it is a chair, see that implied in its being a chair is the possibility that we may sit in it, and then have a seat. Whether or not this is how we would program an android to sit in a chair, this is a thoroughly implausible phenomenological position. Call this phenomenological focus on a familiarity with the world a “Heideggerian” point.

Some will have cringed at my using Heidegger in this way. Hubert Dreyfus, the foremost proponent of Heideggerian phenomenological perspectives in our contemporary thinking about the mind and experience, uses just these points to maintain that experience is nonconceptual, and yet I seem to be saying here that conceptual presentation views are not only consistent with, but perhaps even follow from, these points. What is going on here?

I in fact take these worries very seriously, as will become clear in chapter 5 (§5.3) where I respond to Dreyfus qua nonconceptualist. But there is an important point that Dreyfus and myself disagree on that I can mention now. As I stated at the start of this chapter (§3.1) it is taken for granted in much of the literature on nonconceptual content that by content we mean intentional content. Dreyfus wants to deny this, and his view is that experience has a kind of “practical” content which is importantly different from intentional content. It is the properties of practical content that explain for him how objects are to be included in our practical engagement with the world in experience. Dreyfus is clearly right to some degree, and his Heideggerian phenomenology is very plausible. But there are other ways of incorporating Heideggerian insights, and the

36 See Ch. 5, §3 below.
conceptualist position, as well as the conceptual presentation position, assume that objects are proper objects of experience. Indeed, much of the debate between these camps could be recast as a debate about how our experience of objects should be understood relative to our experience as such.

Putting the issues this way suggests a way of approaching the topic of the weaknesses of the phenomenology of conceptual presentation view. How much, we should ask, is missing from a story of what we experience, in light of the Heideggerian thoughts, by including the notion that we experience objects as something, and in particular as what they are relative to their origins? To the extent that situations like the layout of a room can be grasped as part of our background coping with the world, it is not just objects qua three-dimensional, nor even objects qua social (i.e., inasmuch as they have meaning for us as something), but states of affairs that we describe when we talk about the affordances that world provides to the concept-using subject. It is inasmuch as this final requirement, set upon us by an acceptance of the Heideggerian phenomenological point, cannot be met that the conceptual presentation view should be abandoned.

3.6 Facts View

This leads us to the fourth and final view to be considered here: the Facts View. The facts view holds that facts are the proper objects of experience and that we experience them directly, i.e., neither through construction or presentation.

Earlier I characterized this as the most robust of the four views on offer in this essay. It is robust in a number of ways. First, the notion of “presentation” is abandoned in
favor a “direct” realism about the objects of experience. This is a rejection of representationalism about the objects of experience, of course, inasmuch as representations, I take it, are kinds of presentations. A representation is a re-presentation of an object of knowledge, where the “re” seems to signify a process of breaking down what is there in the world to be presented (the objects of knowledge) such that they can be experienced and then recapturing them. A presentation view (of which the conceptual presentation view is perhaps the most common variant) has it that the objects of knowledge are never broken down. But the notion of presentation remains inasmuch as it is understood that the objects come fully formed, as it were, into the mind of the subject. This is particularly problematic for the conceptual presentation view because it misunderstands the normative nature of the conceptual as evinced by its falling into the myth of the given.

This is robust because the notion of “directly experiencing” (as opposed to having things presented to one) is meant to erase any immutable distinctions between what a subject can experience and what can be the case inasmuch as we can properly be said to experience the facts that make up the empirical world. This is now recognized as a McDowellian point, as it plays a key role in his Mind and World. McDowell says, in effect, that there is no ontological distinction between what I can think, perceive, say, and what can be the case. McDowell explicitly and approvingly cites the early Wittgenstein here who, famously (and famously enigmatically), said “The world is all that is the case” along with “The world is the totality of facts, not of things.”37 But he actually says very little about his ontology of facts aside from this. Why? It might be simply strategic on his

37 Wittgenstein 1929, ¶¶ 1 and 1.1, respectively. McDowell 1994/1996, Lecture 2, §3.
part; many are bothered by an ontology of facts, preferring instead either the “object” ontologies of particle physics or even of common sense (books, tables, cups). For them, the notion of a fact is mysterious. This leads them to reject the important ontological claim made here, and puts the notion of directly experiencing out of reach. Perhaps McDowell wants to remain neutral on just what direct realism means.

As I will argue in the next chapter, however, the notion of a fact is not at all mysterious. And those who have followed me to this point should hope not, for holding to an ontology of facts is, I think, a consequence of recognizing the place of a normative space of reasons within which our perception, thought, and action take place. Once we see ourselves as perceivers, thinkers, and actors in this sense, the world must have a nature which is thinkable as such, and thinkable in ways that are relevant to our assessment of the world as a place within which we can act in better and worse ways.

Second, there’s a robustness concerning our own nature built into the idea of being “tuned” to the world as well. The view is that we do our part in constituting the connection between mind and world. The ontology of the world is such that it can be perceived, thought, and acted on by us. It does its part. But we do our part, we meet it halfway, both as a result of our capacities as persons qua physically and socially embedded. When we say that persons are tuned to the facticity of the world, we mean that they have capacities that if not lacked by other beings are at least differently realized as a result of their physical and conceptual capacitates. This is partly a cashing out of what I identified earlier as not only a Kantian but a (perhaps necessary) commonsense point about a sense-organ structure; we perceive the facts that we do partly because we have the physical capacities to. But it also works to cash out a perhaps more controversial
point: inasmuch as the world has a factive nature, it can be captured in terms that we would deem “conceptual” because of its necessary relation to a normative space of reason-giving. On this view, it is because we are consumers and producers of reasons that we are able to meet the world halfway so that we can be in empirical contact with it qua factive. But this point will be greatly expanded in the next chapter.

3.7 Conclusion

Here’s where we’ve ended up: the robustness of experience runs along two dimensions: one as concerns the objects of experience and the other as concerns us so that we could experience these objects. Both of these dimensions of robustness need to be understood separately and in combination with one another if we are to have a complete account of the contents of human experience. But it is in exploring the epistemology and phenomenology of the Facts View that we will see whether or not the robust notion of experience contained with it is satisfying. It is to these tasks that we will turn in the first half of the next chapter. After that, I will show that the robust view of experience lends both sense and plausibility to the conceptualist position. Indeed, as I will argue, the robust view of experience implies conceptualism.
CHAPTER 4:
How Robust Experience Implies Conceptualism

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 3, I argued that there are both epistemological and phenomenological considerations that lead to the adoption of a robust notion of experience as found in the facts view. This notion is robust along two dimensions: (1) one concerning the proper objects of experience and (2) one concerning the physical and social architecture of us qua persons that work as preconditions on us meeting the factive nature of the world halfway. Both dimensions must be accounted for in explaining our uniquely human experience. In this chapter, I develop the facts view and show what its robustness along these two dimensions allows us to say about the epistemological and phenomenological considerations developed in the previous chapter.

But there will be some work to be done first. Two things in particular are central to my development of the facts view. The first is a characterization of the facticity of the world and the second is a view of concepts. These are issues in metaphysics, first of the world and then of the mind. Having stated these metaphysical views, we’ll consider the question of how the metaphysics of world and mind meet in what I call embeddedness. As I see it, only the right kind of physical and social embeddedness in the world makes one a concept user. From here, the content of actions, perceptions, and then thought more generally on the facts view will be discussed. It will be at this point that we can go back
and examine the epistemology and phenomenology of the facts view. We then end the chapter with a discussion of how it is that the social content externalism central to the facts view implies the conceptualist position.

4.2 Facts

As I argued in the previous chapter, we are driven by phenomenological and epistemological considerations to holding the proper objects of experience to be facts. We seem to experience that things are thus and so, not simply middle-sized-dry-goods, impressions, or some buzzing, blooming confusion. And we’d like to identify facts as the “objects” of knowledge in an effort to avoid constructing a troublesome fidelity inference to justify our knowledge of facts as well to ensure the possibility that some of our knowledge can be called “empirical.” With all of the leaning on the notion of a fact that the facts view has us doing, we had better have a good account of what a fact is.

Let’s start with some examples of facts. It is a fact that as I write this I am sitting in my study, listening to some unidentified (to me) piano sonata, and that my clock reads 4:38. It is not a fact, however, that I am now wearing a hat, drinking whiskey, or feeling pain in my right pinkie toe. There is a glass of water in front of me. My guitar is out of tune. My best friend is not currently at work. The sky looks blue to me from my office window on clear days. I have a $10 bill in my wallet. The Taipai Financial Center is the tallest building in the world. And the Padres currently have a 4-game deficit in the NL West division race.
What do all of these things have in common? They are all *ways things are, states of the world, truth-makers*. And it is because they are all these things that we call them facts.

But there are some differences among these facts as well. They concern different things: what I’m doing, what others are doing, what things are where, how things relate to other things, etc. They make different things true or false: different beliefs, different assertions, different testimonies, etc. And some are perhaps more or less necessary given other facts: perhaps the sky *has* to look that to me given the ways my eyes work and the way the sky is, etc.

The most important difference for me, however, is that some make necessary reference to the social activities of persons and some do not. For instance, a fact about the current standing of a baseball team makes necessary reference to the playing of baseball, a decidedly human pastime, whereas even reference to the height of a building can be understood as staying silent on the nature of the object the height of which is at issue. I follow John Searle in calling the former kind of fact a *social fact* and the latter a *brute fact*.1

To say more about this important difference: That I have a $10 bill in my pocket is Searle’s favorite example of a social fact. A piece of paper’s being a $10 bill is something that can only be had by being related in the right way to the social institutions of trade and currency. That it has just *this* mass and just *this* color are brute facts about any given $10 bill.

That I am listening to an unidentified piano sonata is also a social fact, though it might be harder to see why. The reason is that it contains reference to what I could (or in

1 See Searle 1995.
this case could not) identify as a piano sonata. A thing is only a piano sonata given the existence of a practice of producing piano sonatas. And the practice exists in virtue of certain intentions and desires of persons.

What kind of fact it is that the sky looks blue to me from my office on certain clear days? Depending on how we characterize what it is for something to look blue to me, this could be classified as either brute or social. An account which makes looking blue to one a matter only of sentience (as opposed to sapience) will call this a brute fact, whereas competing accounts would classify this as a social fact. I will leave this question to the side for the moment.

Now, I said at the end of the previous chapter that according to Wittgenstein, “The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” This is a mysterious claim for many, particularly in the context of Wittgenstein’s challenging and obscure *Tractatus*. Even if we can accept the, I think, minimal notion of a fact as a state of the world, Wittgenstein seems to be saying something about the ontology of the world as such, not just about what facts are. It’s one thing to say that there are facts and quite another to say that the world is made of facts. Luckily, this is something we do not have to adopt to talk of facts in the way endorsed here.

Indeed, there are other technicalities of Wittgenstein’s world of facts view that we do not have to endorse. Wittgenstein makes much of a distinction between atomic and compound facts. And he spends time giving us an account of how even atomic facts are “a combination of objects (entities, things)” But, again, we can separate ourselves from

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2 Wittgenstein 1921, §1.1.  
3 *Ibid.*, §2.01.
the logical atomism that the _Tractatus_ fueled and hold to something more minimal. That more minimal claim is just this: that one of the things that there are in this world is facts. I put this by saying that the world has a factive nature, despite what other types of natures it might have as well.

Another way to put the point that the world has a factive nature is to say that: *things are the case* in the world. We can see what this means by seeing what it would be to deny it. There are at least two options here. First, one could think that there are no facts but rather only _interpretations_. We _think_ the world to be such-and-such, but are always wrong inasmuch as the world is not really *any way rather than another*. It is only in relation to us that things can be said to be one way or another. Second, one might think that there is perhaps, in some sense, ways that the world are, but that facts, qua truth-makers, are of a kind with propositions and therefore cannot, on my own view as anti-propositionalist,⁴ be admitted.

To these options we should say: with regard to the first, the proponent of this view and I are not so apart from one another as might first appear. This is a deeply anti-naturalist position, for one is forced to say that the world has an _interpretative_ nature instead of factive one. If it is interpretations of the world that are the proper objects of experience, and if our experience is to be at all _of_ the world in the intentional sense, then one has a metaphysics of interpretations rather than interpretations. Though I will not argue so here, my conceptualist conclusion would follow just as well from the adoption of such a metaphysically robust view.

⁴ See §§ 1.6 and 2.5.
With regard to the second, the challenge here is to provide an account of facts which is not propositionalist. This is what I will now attempt to do. Inasmuch as I succeed, I have provided an account of facts which is consistent with my rejection of the view that propositions make up the contents of experience.

On my view, facts are limits on experience. They constrain what we can, and at any moment do, experience. That I exist in a gravitational field, that I live in La Jolla, that my neighbor’s infant is sleeping in the apartment above me, all constrain what I can experience.

But facts are more than limits. Or, rather, that they provide to me limits also works to provide to me possibilities for experience. To put it metaphorically, facts act as a canvas upon which we can experience. That they are the world’s facts makes our experience of the world, though were they the facts of something else (a virtual world, say) our experience would be of it instead.5

Importantly, this is true of both brute and social facts. That I exist in a gravitational field is a brute fact if ever there was one. In all of the existence of mankind, only a select few have ever existed outside a gravitational field. Indeed, that I exist inside just this gravitational field can be seen in the makeup of my body itself, yet without it I would not be able to swim in the community pool. That I have a $10 bill in my wallet means that I have a certain amount of purchasing power in today’s market, but that I only have $10 means that that power is somewhat limited.

5 Though we would want to say that inasmuch as the virtual world existed within our world, we experience a part of our world as well. But then this only points to how wrong we can be about the world when all we experience are the local facts of our own present world which is surely another kind of virtual world.
So what, then, are facts on this alternative account? We’ve already said that built into the idea of the robust notion of experience is that facts are the objects of experience in the intentionalist sense. To this we’ve added the idea that facts are limits and possibilities on experience. We should here note that not all facts are experienced, or even can be experienced on this view. Why? Subject too are parts of the world. As a result, they too are constrained by the facts, i.e., there are ways they are as well. For one thing, there are facts about the sensory and cognitive capacities of the subject. For another, there are facts about the location of the subject in the world. Both type of fact set limits on the experience of the subject. Being in La Jolla now, I cannot attend a play in London in an hour. But that I live in a time of easy air travel means that I might be able to attend a later show.

Now, one might ask: Why aren’t facts in this sense just propositions? Aren’t you still, by being committed to the existence of facts, also committed to the existence of propositions? There is probably a sense in which this is true. But I would not claim responsibility for it. If there are facts in my sense, it makes sense that there would be philosophers who Platonize them in various ways. This is what I claim the propositionalist does to facts by thinking of propositions as abstract sentence-like structures that are “grasped” in thought and “expressed” in utterances. If one insists on an ontology of propositions so as to make sense of linguistic content—and this could be the case—do not forget that this is an account of experiential content. One might perhaps want to claim that propositions are the necessary currency of linguistic exchange, that even if experi-

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6 Thanks to Rick Grush for pressing me on this fundamental issue.
7 This is the notion of a proposition that was given in §1.6 as that under discussion.
ence has the content that I say linguistic content demands propositions. I wouldn’t want to stop him. It may be that an ontology of facts can support an ontology of propositions. But they needn’t be the same thing if we refuse to give them the abstract properties of being “grasped by thought” or as being “sentence-like” just because they can be “expressed” by them.

There is another kind of argument against talking about facts in this way that I’d like to consider before we end this section. Some philosophers find the notion of a fact deeply challenging for logical reasons. The so-called “slingshot argument” as presented by Davidson and others purports to show that were there facts there would be no way of individuating them, with the result that there would really only be one big fact. The point is deflationary; it isn’t saying that there aren’t any facts, necessarily, but that they can do no good theoretical work for us insofar as individuating facts is an impossible business.

There is some sense to this worry. But one must put it in context. The proper context of the debate wherein the slingshot argument (rather forcefully) appears is that of a discussion of linguistic content, and the value of the correspondence between our representations of the facts and the facts themselves in the determination of the meanings of what we linguistically express. Inasmuch as such projects include within them a commitment to the factive nature of the world, they make necessary an account of how we determine the facts given our access only to mental representations. But the complication is that they set that world (and thus meaning and truth) behind a veil. Sentences, strictly speaking, cannot be the facts that they refer to. They are of a different nature. They must

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8 This is doubtless connected with the attack on absolute truth and objectivity undertaken by existentialist thinkers following from Pascal and the thought of the so-called “post-modernists,” but here I’m thinking more specifically of thinkers like Davidson and Quine who worry about semantic indeterminism.

9 Davidson 1967. For a detailed discussion of the slingshot argument, see Neale 2001.
rather *express* the facts in a way that can be understood. On the view attacked by the slingshot, sentences express the facts by *representing* them.\(^\text{10}\)

That there is such a veil is not a given, however. Just because one account that puts facts at the center of its analysis necessarily has to deal with it (and thus face serious skeptical worries) does not mean that all accounts that do so face these same worries. My view does not rely on our ability to represent the facts in the way suggested to be problematic by the slingshot argument. On the view defended here, the facts *just are* the content of the experience. There is no veil between what is and what is thought because there is an identity between the two. The worry about characterizing the facts with a representation so that we can *then* experience them does not arise here.

As I see it, the power of the slingshot argument in the philosophy of language and logic has created an air of suspicion around the notion of a fact as such. But if my position makes any sense, we should be more open to the place of facts in our theorizing.

### 4.3 Concepts

I talked at the end of the Chapter 3 about being “tuned” to the facts. It is here that the notion of a concept comes into play. Though we have other preconditions on our being tuned the world, we can say, roughly, that

A concept is that which (other than that provided by our sensible faculties) allows a cognitive creature to be tuned to the facticity of the world.

\(^{10}\) Wittgenstein’s account of facts in the *Tractatus* works like this. Linguistic content is the expression of facts by a process of picturing. The picturing account is supposed to avoid the problems of representation since if a sentence is constructed that does not picture then it fails to refer. The problem is that it isn’t at all clear that the world is picturable due it’s immense complexity.
Note the qualification here; the sensible faculties (our receptivity to light and sound waves, the mental processes that underlie our ability to sense) are an important part of the story of how it is that we can be tuned to the facticity of the world. But they are not the whole story. The claim is that concepts play a central role in that story as well. Let’s get at what that story is by considering a few other attempts to answer it.

The notion of a concept is no doubt one of the most fundamental and difficult of all philosophical notions to explain; fundamental because there are hardly any philosophers in any area of philosophy that do not talk about concepts in their accounts; difficult because there is so much said using the notion and yet so little said about the notion itself. The term “concept” seems to be one of those rare philosophical terms that most philosophers are willing to let go undefined. As I see it, many who claim to have something to say about “nonconceptual content” make their claims on the basis of unexamined intuitions about what concepts are. It can be rather frustrating, in fact, to talk to someone about this debate when they have never really thought deeply about what a concept is.

Of course, this is not to say that everyone is guilty of ignoring this important question. Indeed, theories of concepts have gained serious attention over the last 20–30 years. Philosophers, psychologists, and cognitive scientists have all recognized that the notion of a concept cannot go undefined forever, particularly once the important role they play in cognition is recognized. Many such theories are still underdeveloped and unsophisticated, concepts being (in one popular undergraduate psychology textbook\(^{11}\)) little more than that which allows us to compare things, for instance. But there is perhaps a

\(^{11}\) Santrock 1997, see p. 254.
good reason for this: What are we supposed to say about concepts? How are we to even begin answering this fundamental of a question? It is just because of the fundamental nature of this notion that there is real confusion about how to approach a theory of concepts.

A popular approach over the last 10 years or so has been to talk about the desiderata on a theory of concepts. Given our assumptions about what concepts are, what must an account of concepts look like? Theorists working along these line have developed a new trade in desiderata. One such theorist can ask another which desiderata he holds to, can question him as to his choices, can argue with him for one as against another. Because of this, it is tempting to talk in terms of desiderata ourselves.

On the other hand, let’s not fool ourselves about what these desiderata are. Since they are based on prior intuitions (or theoretical assumptions), the project here is really one of systematizing a scattered collection of commitments about what concepts are and not so much one of developing a new theoretical notion. The line between these two projects isn’t sharp, but, if I’m right, it does mean that we can talk just as well about assumptions about concepts as we can about desiderata on a theory of concepts without confusing the dialectic of the debate.

Let’s take a quick look at some of these desiderata. Most everyone who thinks about concepts agrees that thought can very often be described as the manipulation of concepts. This works to tie concepts to thought, and it is then said that it is a desideratum on any theory of concepts that it include reference to how concepts are used in thought and other cognitive activities. We can call this a thought involvement desideratum on a theory of concepts. But some conceive of stronger desiderata, holding that a thing which
is found to be manipulating concepts in the relevant way would have to considered a thinker. Along these lines, many desiderata have to do with the way in which concepts constitute—are somehow constitutive of—thought. Call this latter thought the thought constitution desideratum.

If we accept the more interesting thought constitution desideratum (as against the mere thought involvement desideratum), the question is, How do concepts constitute thought? One way of asking this question is to ask, What do concepts do?

Let’s be careful here, for we should rather say this: What do thinkers do with concepts? The deployment of concepts, on some accounts, must necessarily be able to come under the free control of the thinking subject. (We’ll come back to what it would mean to deny it in a minute.) The next question is, To what end are concepts deployed? An almost universal reply is that concepts are responsible for categorization, i.e. our ability to group items into kinds. As a result—and here is where we see how it is that concepts can play a role in rational thought—concepts allow us to compare things, and thus to differentiate things. One way this might work would be that we compare items by finding which kinds they both fall under and which kinds they do not. Desiderata which claim that concepts must account for our ability to categorize, and even those that seek in concepts a foundation of rational (normative) thought, can be seen as protecting these and similar widely-shared assumptions about the role that concepts play in thought.

The account of concepts to be developed as part of the robust notion of experience will share these assumptions (and their attendant desiderata) with the bulk of the literature. But there are other desiderata that are more controversial, some of which we will be adopting and some of which we will reject.
Firstly, many theories of concepts assume conceptual atomism with respect to what Peacocke called the *possession conditions* of a concept (i.e., the conditions under which a subject can be said to possess a concept). On an atomistic account, it is possible for a cognitive creature to possess, and thus use, only one concept. Indeed, it should be, on this account, possible for a cognitive creature to possess any number of *wholly unrelated* atomistic concepts, which in turn (on the assumption of thought constituency) give it any number of wholly unrelated atomistic capacities to think about such and such being the case.

For example, a conceptual atomist impressed by a thermostat’s ability to “sense” the air temperature and then “act” in response by pushing electrons through itself could determine that it thereby shows itself as thinking. The only thing that the thermostat seems to lack, they might say, is the ability to think freely. But this needn’t matter for those who take it that man is determined. If even we do not *really* think freely after all, and yet still maintain our commitment to our descriptions of ourselves as free as we play a game of billiards, then neither the thermostat’s nor our inability to deploy concepts at will should keep us (the thermostat and us) from being considered thinkers all the same. The only difference is that we have the concept of free thought which we wrongly apply to ourselves on the basis of all sorts of bad evidence that is beyond the reckoning of the thermostat.

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I reject both the atomism and the baldly naturalist determinism of these views.\(^{13}\) There is no reason that I can see for accepting atomistic theories of concepts and concept possession except for whatever theoretical interest there is in seeing what happens once we adopt such a starting point. Whether or not there are good arguments for atomism in other spheres of thought, there is little in our phenomenology to recommend them. As stressed by Merleau-Ponty, under the influence of *gestalt* psychology,\(^{14}\) context matters when it comes to the contents of our experience. Something that looks blue in one context can look purple in another and green in yet another context. As a result, a subject who applies the concept *blue* to an object in the first context and might then fail to apply that concept in the second and third contexts. We could not correct the subject in this case; they are characterizing the contents of their experiences in ways that we as theorists should respect. But this in the case even if on some objective scale the light wave bouncing off of the object and reaching the retina are the same in each context.

And as for determinism, I want to maintain what I see as the inconsistent (to determinism) yet essential normative role for freedom in the constitution of responsible empirical thought about the world. Besides the strong plausibility of the point, it has an important theoretical role as well: it is this commitment that connects talk of concepts to the folk psychological assumptions that underlie the intentional psychology that, in turn, underlies the whole nonconceptual content debate. Kant would say that it is for practical reasons that we accept that we are free in our thought, for only then can we be responsi-

\(^{13}\) I should say that it is very possible that no one holds these views to the extent considered here. But these strands of thought are, I think, still deeply influential in how these debates gets pitched in the first place. Though tracing out these lines of thought into the literature is an important project, it is one that I will have to undertake in another essay.

\(^{14}\) Merleau-Ponty 1942, 1945.
ble for our words and actions. The thought here is that our commitment to freedom runs deeper than this: the freedom to think by way of the application of concepts is a prerequisite for rationality itself. Responsible doing goes hand in hand with contentful seeing and thinking.

Note the logic of these arguments (against conceptual atomism and determinism). I’ve already said that we are not going to be concerned with the sub-personal level of mentality. If there is content there, it is not our concern. Why not? Because we are concerned with the content of experience as revealed by phenomenological analyses. My point with the first argument is that inasmuch as compositionality assumes conceptual atomism it runs up against what appear to be strong gestaltist conclusions concerning the phenomenology of our experiences of things as basic as colors. The Kantian argument against determinism works in the same way. Whether or not determinism is true of us, determinism runs contrary to our self-understanding. When we introspect, we see ourselves as free to think as we wish.

4.4 Reasons and Concepts

One could spend much more time mulling these desiderata and the prior assumptions they are meant to protect. Though this would be an interesting task, it will have to put off here. On our agenda is the development of a theory of a concepts, one that we will then put to use in thinking about mental content and the possibility of nonconceptual mental content. Our approach will be to develop a theory of concepts that follows out the implications of a commitment of our own prior assumption. The commitment is this:
(S) The space of reasons is the space of concepts.

I take a commitment to a principle of this sort to be central to the work of John McDowell, Robert Brandom, and Wilfrid Sellars among others. Each of these philosophers has done much to develop this thought, though it was McDowell who came closest to formulating it in this way.\(^{15}\) Let’s look closer at what it means, and what kind of theory of concepts it leads us to.

First of all, note that S is an identity statement. The space of reasons is the space of concepts. If true, and on the assumption of the indiscernibility of identicals, in characterizing one we characterize the other. This would be a positive turn for the development of a theory of concepts, for it provides us with a perspective from which to approach the difficult, very general question of what concepts are. The idea is that we can understand concepts—and the nature of the conceptual in general—by understanding reasons and the nature of the rational in general. In some sense, we’ll spend the rest of this chapter uncovering the meaning of this claim.

\(^{15}\) As McDowell formulates it, the thought is: “The space of concepts is at least part of what Wilfrid Sellars calls ‘the Space of Reasons’” (1994/1996, Lecture 1, §2). This does make questionable my calling this, as I do later, a McDewillian identity between the space of reasons and the space of concepts. On the other hand, McDowell does make an explicit identity between the space of reasons and the Kantian “realm of freedom,” going on to insist that “conceptual capacities are capacities whose exercise is in the domain of responsible freedom” (ibid., 12). So it is, I take it, for McDowell, through the realm of freedom that the identity is made. Another point: Recall that in §3.5 I noted that McDowell formulates the Myth of the Given in this way: “the space of reasons is made out to be more extensive than the space of concepts” (ibid., 6). This means that we avoid the Myth of the Given by asserting that the space of concepts is at least as broad (covers at least as much phenomena) as the space of reasons. The identity is secured if we can argue the other direction, that the space of reasons covers as much phenomena as the space of concepts. Though I offer no argument to this effect here, it’s worth pointing out that if this were not the case it would not challenge the conceptualist position that I’m exploring here. I am trying to argue that experience is conceptual. If there are areas of experience that are conceptual but not in the space of reasons, that would be fine by my account.
One thing that S cannot mean, however, is that concepts and reasons are identical. The identity, I take it, is between “the spaces” of each of these things. This sounds rather metaphorical, and so it’s worth asking what is meant by spaces here. A follow-up question would be, In what way they could be identical if it is not by way of an identity between their namesakes, concepts and reasons.

To cash out the “spaces” metaphor a bit, let’s start by thinking of what some philosophers have called “natural kinds.” A natural kind is what one supposedly gets when one has, in Plato’s words, “cut up each kind according to its species along its natural joints, and to try not to splinter any part, as a bad butcher might do.” On this way of thinking, some things would fittingly be called unnatural kinds, owing to the fact that they are either improper cuts or simply not cuts suggested by nature itself. For example, a slide tackle is a kind of maneuver in soccer, a generic term for something that the players do on the field and that there are official rules about when and how they can be done without penalty. “Slide tackle” has just as much reason to be a kind as “rabbit.” But what makes it a kind isn’t its appearance in nature (whatever that is) but insofar as it appears in the game of soccer.

Once a kind has been defined, we can define a space as that which determines kinds, both natural and unnatural (in my sense of the term). Sellars points to something which determines kinds in this sense when he talks about a “space of reasons.” The practices of giving and asking for reasons operate in ways that are sensitive to determinations of kinds in both what can count as a reason but also in what can count as an object suitable to fulfilling a certain normative demand. I might accept a new toy as a responsible

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16 Phaedrus, 265d–266a.
replacement if I felt that it is the type of object which matters to me and not so much the object itself (e.g., if the object had no collectible or sentimental value). On top of this, being responsible for what one says and does as well as holding others responsible for what they say and do, determines kinds relative to them. For example, telling a lie is clearly an “unnatural kind” common among the practitioners of giving and asking for reasons. So is, I will argue later, seeing a rabbit or thinking about a golden mountain.

A closely-related characterization of spaces is given by John McDowell when he appeals to the notion of a mode of intelligibility. His idea is that different spaces are known in different ways, and in particular by the use of different ways of understanding and gaining knowledge of them. Importantly, we can make sense (or come to know) a space of things and events only inasmuch as we approach that space in a mode of intelligibility appropriate to it. What’s nice about having this characterization along with one in terms of determining kinds is that it allows us both ontological and epistemological perspectives from which to talk about spaces.

In ontological terms, though I think it makes sense to talk of, e.g., the game of soccer as a space on its own, and thus of determining its own kinds and needing to be approached in terms of its own intelligibility, the most commonly recognized spaces are also the most central to this debate. The Searlian notion of social and brute facts can be explained in terms of spaces in this sense. Some things are only intelligible if one has the

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17 McDowell 1998. It’s worth pointing out that Hubert Dreyfus talks about intelligibility as well in his 2005. This is no doubt partly because he is there responding to McDowell, but this is central notion in Dreyfus’s reading of Heidegger’s Being and Time as well. Dreyfus equates modes of being in Heidegger with modes of intelligibility. It is for this reason that the being of persons (which Heidegger calls Existenz) is not to be reduced to that of substances (Vorhandenheit, “presence-to-hand”) nor of equipment (Zuhandenheit, “readiness-to-hand”). The point is that modes of intelligibility should not be seen as a McDowellian notion.
concerns of man (the space of the social) in focus as one thinks about them. A game of cards has rules which no natural science could explain, for instance. Natural kinds are determined by what McDowell (extending Sellars’ discussion in EPM) calls the space of nature, and figure necessarily in the characterization of the brute facts of the world.  

In epistemological terms, though we might think it possible to know brute facts without having any understanding of the mode intelligibility appropriate to the purely physical (i.e., no concept of material, cause and/or effect, etc.), we would be hesitant to say that someone knew what money was without awareness of the practices of trade between buyers and sellers, and perhaps the role of currency in systems beyond the barter system. This point extends to empirical phenomena more generally. We recognize the role of what we can (without seriously committing to the real existence of such a thing) call the space of trade that exists between individuals and communities. Being privy to the space of trade (usually by being a member of it) is a precondition for forming thoughts using concepts (both normative and descriptive) that belong within that system. Said concepts categorize possible events and actions defined relative to that space, things that exist for the witnessing, contemplating, and even doing of those possessing them.

With that said, let’s go back to the claim that the space of reasons is the space of concepts. What is meant by the space of concepts in this formulation? By “space of concepts” I take to mean that space (defined in the sense above) within which concepts are objects. This is not the case with all spaces; that is, not all spaces need include concepts as objects. Of course, they “have” concepts in some sense of the term. We needn’t deny

(nor affirm, for that matter) that all spaces (in principle) can be conceptualized. The split is between those spaces that include concepts as objects and those that do not.

Recall, now, that we’ve already offered a definition of the notion of a concept in §4.3. We said there “A concept is that which (other than that provided by our sensible faculties) allows a cognitive creature to be tuned to the facticity of the world.” Combining that definition with the idea that some spaces have concepts as objects within them and some do not, we end up with the idea that some spaces allow for cognitive creatures to be tuned to the facticity of the world while others do not. Taking this in combination with the idea that the space of concepts is identical with the space of reasons, the implication is that only by being a member of the space of reasons can a cognitive creature be tuned to the facticity of the world. Being a member of the space of reasons (though this should not be taken as a formulation for being a member of a space as such) requires having particular essential properties that can only be characterized by reference to the space of reasons, those which make one a player in the practices that determine what counts as a reason for what.

4.5 Two Types of Embeddedness

So far, then, I’ve sketched accounts of both facts and concepts. Central to the account of facts is that there are ways things are in the world and that some of these ways the world is are brute and some are social. To say that concepts allow a cognitive creature access to these ways is to say that without concepts a cognitive creature could not grasp certain facts (i.e., that concepts are in some sense the explanation of a cognitive creatures being able to do this). On the other hand, grasping a fact evinces having concepts for a
cognitive creature. Put in the context of mental content attribution, or the characterization of another’s experiences, when we attribute to them the grasp of a fact we take this to be evidence that they have the relevant concepts.

But then here we can expand the discussion by asking, What does it mean to grasp a fact in this way? Put another way, What is it to be tuned to the facticity of the world? Here I want to invoke talk of being embedded in the world.

Talk of being “embedded” develops out of mental and linguistic content externalist views. Hillary Putnam argues that linguistic content is externalist inasmuch as it is necessarily embedded in the physical environment of the speaker. His argument for this conclusion is well-known, so I will not dwell on it here. But the basic idea is that if there were a Twin Earth where XYZ filled the lakes and rivers and not H₂O, the Twin Earthers would mean XYZ when they said “water” and not what we mean, namely H₂O. As I want to put it, it is a virtue of being embedded with water that we Earthers mean water when we say “water” and their alternate embedding with twater (Twin Earth water) that explains their alternate meaning. The notion of embeddedness that Putnam has in mind is thus a physicalist one; we are local parts of the same physical system, water and us, but not whatever physical system Twin Earth is a local part of.

Tyler Burge expanded this view from the physical to the social, which is to say that he expanded the notion of embeddedness beyond its physical reading and into a social one. On his view, social embeddedness determines meaning, too. Burge has us imagine someone whose concept of “arthritis” includes causes of pain different from

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19 Much of my thought on externalism is influenced by Rowlands’s discussion in his 2003, including the sketches of Putnam and Burge that follow. See Ch. 6 of Rowland 2003.
20 Putnam 1975.
those categorized as arthritis according to our concept. Suppose this person to have such a concept in virtue of their being embedded within a linguistic community that accepts different standards for the correct application of this concept to one. For example, they give and ask for medications differently than we do based on (and constitutive of) the meaning of the phonetically identical “arthritis.” I think Burge is right to extend content externalism in this way. The only thing I would add is that what Burge is referring to here is a space of reasons. Being diagnosed with arthritis in one community is going to result in different medications being justifiably prescribed than would be in another. Put in these terms, we could say that for Putnam speakers are always embedded in one or another space of reasons, and that the meanings of what one says are dependent upon the space of reasons that they are in.

In general, I am very sympathetic to these externalist positions, finding them both very attractive and commonsensical. It seems to me that the only way to reject content externalism is to deny the obvious point that the shape of our thoughts or speech acts is determined by the shape of the thoughts or speech acts of others; thinking and speaking are things we do together, and they are limited by what we can do together as well. It is because of this that I accept a form of physical and social externalism and think about these views in terms of embeddedness in a culture. But like many who have started down the externalist path—for externalism is not so much a position but a tendency in philosophy—I think Putnam and Burge merely scratch the surface of what externalism is. This is for many reasons, but most importantly to the extent that they (at least in these early

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22 This seems to be one of the themes of Rowland 2003 inasmuch as he extends externalist thinking to consciousness in Ch. 10. See also McCulloch 2002 and McCulloch 2003 who extends externalist thinking to phenomenological issues in the formation of a position he calls “phenomenological externalism” or the view that “the mind just ain’t in the head” (2003, 12).
papers) are concerned with linguistic content only and not mental content. I’ve already talked about what I think it means to keep these two types of content distinct, and I needn’t review that. But what we should note is that an externalism about mental content is very different from an externalism about linguistic content. How it is that contentful mental states are embedded in physical and social environments? It might be that mental contents are pure extensions of linguistic contents, and, if so, the embeddedness would be a kind of extension as well. This seems to me to get the issue the wrong way around, or at least to put an unwelcome emphasis on the linguistic over the mental in our understanding of externalism. I would rather approach an externalist account of mental content directly in terms of how it is that mental states are embedded in the physical and social environments of the thinker, and how it is that their meanings (their content) is constituted by being so embedded. These questions will be taken up in the next few sections of this chapter.

But before we get to that, I should make one important clarifying point. Built into mental content externalism as I understand it is the idea that the facts themselves can be part of the content of an experience. Other content externalists would adamantly deny this, saying only that the facts at best partially determine the content. This is a fine position, but it assumes something that I reject: a representationalist explanation of content. Following Wittgenstein, McDowell asserts in his 1994/1996 that

there is no ontological gap between the sort of things one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks is what is the case. So since the world is everything that is the case

See §1.5.
(as [Wittgenstein] once wrote), there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world.\(^{24}\)

Taking this seriously, and avoiding idealism as one does so, we can say that mental content is sometimes best characterized by pointing to the facts themselves and not necessarily to a cognitive creature’s mental representation of them. This is because certain kinds of mental content \textit{just are} the facts. I will argue in the next two sections that this is the case with the contents of perceptual experience and with the contents of actions.

If I am right about this, however, then some version of anti-representationalism is true about mental contents. An anti-representationalist denies that all mental states have to be characterized by appeal to the notion of a mental representation. Holding this view is consonant with, and indeed can be seen as \textit{the result of holding to}, the phenomenological results of the previous chapter. In Chapter 2 I called this view a commitment to the idea that the world is its own best model.\(^{25}\)

My anti-representationalism is not total, however, at least not in principle. I am willing to accept that sometimes the best way to characterize thought is precisely in terms of representations. An account of the contents of non-perceptual, non-active experience (pure empirical thought) could likely be spelled out in terms of representations. But I will not be offering such an account here.

\section{The Content of Actions}

\(^{24}\) 1994/1996, Lecture 2, §3.

\(^{25}\) §2.6. In connection with §5.3 below—in my discussion of Dreyfus 2005 and Minsky’s frame problem—note that this phrase belongs to Rodney Brooks. Dreyfus reports Brooks as having the slogan \textit{the best model of the world is the world itself} and quotes him as saying that one of his simulated robots was “using the world as its own best model” (as quoted by Dreyfus, in Dreyfus 2005, 49). Dreyfus claims that Brooks adopted this slogan and approach because he recognized the importance of the analyses of the existential phenomenologists through his and Minsky’s confrontations with Dreyfus in the 1970s.
It is not always recognized that actions have content. This is particularly true of those whose focus is on explaining linguistic content. After all, one does not say anything, it seems, when one, e.g., picks up a glass of water and takes a drink or reaches over and pulls the covers over oneself in the middle of the night. Further, actions which might appear to say something can be understood to be ways of expressing linguistic content, and thus be seen as parasitic on that which really does have content. An umpire at a ball-game can “say” many things without uttering a word. But of course his hand signals and indecipherable “strike” calls have meaning only inasmuch as there is a prior, very regimented system of rules that sets up expectations for the production of behaviors which acts as judgments on those rules. Those who want to hold that whatever content actions have is parasitic on linguistic content gain much support from these strong considerations.

Such a view is by no means forced upon us, however.26 Key to our being able to resist such a position is recognition of the fact that actions are mental events. My actions can only be made sense of when put into proper context with the contents of my mind. This is obvious when issues of responsibility come up. Did the subject mean to X? Intend to X? Even know what it is to X? It can be harder to see how the mental is involved in action, but once a necessary connection has been made between the two, it is implied by our commitment to keep linguistic and mental content distinct that an account of action cannot be parasitic on an account of language.

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26 To be fair, not all philosophers of language can be said to have ignored the idea that actions have content. Those that talk about “propriety conditions” can be read as attributing content to actions to the extent that what actions have been or could be performed contribute to such conditions.
The philosophy of action is built around the question: What makes an event an action? The question presumes that actions are events, though it seems few would disagree with this if we clarified this question by insisting that events are changes in the facts. The question really is, What is it about actions—either in their having something extra or lacking something that other events have—that sets them apart from events more generally?

A plausible first response is to say that actions are *events plus human involvement*. This naïve view is also, seemingly, the simplest if we take it for granted that without persons there would be no action. Though intuitive, this has a rather serious problem. Consider an example: suppose that when a cyclist takes a turn, her doing so is an action. It is something that she has undertaken. Certainly if the event is undertaken (in the sense that the cyclist undertakes a turn) it is an action. But events can be affected by human involvement in ways other than by being undertaken. The cyclist may kick up a small pebble with her tire as she takes the turn. But we should not want to call her doing so an action, preferring to rather call it a consequence of her action (her taking the turn). Notions of responsibility rely heavily on the distinction between what we do and what the results of our doing so are.

We can address this question and thus find our way to a better view on action if we ask, Why do we call a thing an action? Why would we call it an action? “Because,” we

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27 Note that this definition of events does not make use of the notion of a cause. This is important because an answer to the question of what causes can be determines an answer to what distinguishes actions from events.

28 We might not want to accept this, preferring to think that all sorts of things can be said to act. Few would say that animals do not act, though most would say that a tin-can phone does not. I am going to sidestep this issue as much as possible on the grounds that it is the experience of persons that is the target for explanation here. I discussed this Chapter 1, §9.
might say, “it was something she undertook to do. She wished to maintain a line down the mountain, and only by turning could she have achieved this goal.” Since the change in facts was initiated by the combination of her beliefs and desires, what many call a belief/desire pair, we say that it is an action of hers.

But then even this is insufficient for identifying which events occurred when our cyclist undertook her turn. If a computer animator, for example, were to try to animate this scene in as realistic an approximation as possible, he would end up recreating many details of her turning that we would not plausibly be able to attribute to her belief/desire pair. Did she believe that she would kick up that rock at just that speed and just that trajectory? Of course not. She probably didn’t even notice it. And of course the turn itself was taken at precisely such-and-such a speed, at such-and-such an angle, at such-and-such a time, etc. It seems impossible that either the content of her beliefs or desires could be spelled out in anything like the terms necessary to capture the fine detail of the events that are due to her.

With these questions we are starting to see where issues concerning the philosophy of the content of action come into play. Assuming we are comfortable talking about belief/desire pairs as somehow the causes of actions—which is what I think the above paragraphs have shown and it part and parcel of a commitment to characterize a subject’s experience in ways that are true to how they experience29—the next issue that needs addressing is a decision on whether or not the content of an action is taken to be something like the set of events that have occurred because of that belief/desire pair. I think we’ve seen that there are good reasons we should not say this, and we can go back again to

29 This is the part of the conceptual constraint that even Bermúdez agrees to. See §1.4 above.
talking about issues of responsibility to here, for we want to say that we should be responsible for what we do.

As I see it, the content of an action is set by what Davidson and Anscombe before him called the “intention” of an agent. I say “set by” because on my view the content of an action is a combination of the events that have occurred because of the intention of the agent and the understanding of those events that is allowed the subject by their particular belief/desire pair in the context of their own role as player in the space of reasons. There are three important elements to this view: (1) intentions cause the events that could be actions; (2) events play a role in constituting the content of an action; (3) the subject’s understanding of the event caused by the intention plays a role in constituting the content of an action. Note that in both (2) and (3), I mean the roles that events and the understanding of an intention that cause an event play are both necessary, in the sense that there is no content to an action without one of them, or that until both are present, no content has been constituted.

What does this theory of the content of an action tell us about the content of our cyclist’s action? Since the theory raises the issue of the understanding of an intention, much relies on how we spell out her capacity to understand at least the most obvious and serious ramifications of her actions. If she could not do this, it is not at all clear that we would to attribute to her the belief/desire pair that could cause the event in the first place. And it is in part in spelling out the details of her understanding that we characterize the content of her action.

If this is right, the question can be focused quite a bit by assuming her to be, say, an expert cyclist (as against a beginner cyclist). An expert cyclist—one who has spent a
great deal of time both thinking about cycling and riding her bike in all different kinds of conditions, will have a very good understanding of the fine details of the events she puts into motion. Indeed, what else could it mean for her to be an expert cyclist. Given this, the content of her action could be extremely detailed; i.e., she would be able to form more complex intentions than the beginner cyclist which, in turn, determines which events are to be included as elements in the content of her action.

We can change the example a bit to make the point. Suppose that she saw the pebble on the ground and that it was part of her intention to run it over. Its being kicked up could then be seen to be an action of hers, to the extent that she, qua expert cyclist, knows that sometimes small pebbles get kicked up when one rides over them. The beginner cyclist might not know this, and might even be surprised when a pebble they ran over kicks up into bottom of the bicycle frame. When characterizing the content of the beginner cyclist’s action, my view says that we should not include this event to be an act of hers. It says the same thing about the expert cyclist who did not form a belief/desire pair that included reference to the pebble.

I think these examples show that my theory tracks well intuitions that we have about what it is that people do (in particular in the sense of acting as against the sense of what they do which includes the results of their actions), i.e., the content of their actions. But one last point needs to be made before the conceptualist point about the content of an action can be seen clearly: the understanding required of a subject such that events she has brought about can be characterized as part of the content of her actions or not is the result of being a member of the (or just a) space of reasons. Call this the necessary con-
connection thesis. I maintain that if the necessary connection thesis can be made plausible, the conceptualist position (with respect to the content of actions) will be secured.

Luckily for us, the necessary connection thesis is not difficult to make plausible given the results of past discussions in this essay. The ability to understand the world requires the ability to grasp the facts of the world. Some of these facts are social facts, and (as social) it takes being a member of a space of reasons to grasp them. We secure the conceptualist position with respect to the contents of actions by showing that it is impossible to conceive a subject that forms belief/desire pairs about social facts without thereby understanding them as such. This would secure for them the distance from the space of reasons that could make them a counterexample to the theory. The problem with all the purported counterexamples that could be conceived here, however, is that we will also be hesitant to hold such a “subject” responsible. If a subject could be conceived that had no idea what a bicycle was (including that it was simply a physical object), then we would not want to say that it was possible for them to do anything with the bicycle (qua bicycle) in the first place. If this were the case, there would be nothing to characterize, no actions to have content at all. There would only be empty events.

Does my theory imply that there are no unintended actions. It depends on what unintended actions are supposed to be. If an unintended actions are supposed to be actions with no connection whatsoever to any intention of “actor,” then it wouldn’t be at clear to me why one would call them actions as opposed to just events to begin with. I would want to rule such “actions.” But if unintended actions are anything like unintended consequences, then my theory should be able to accommodate them. An unintended action in this sense would be an action the intention of which (as part of the belief/desire
pair) referred to that event under a different action type. For example, say that I mean to throw you a wiffle ball. But because of the wind and the fact that this little wiffle ball is easily influenced by strong wind (neither of which I took account of) the ball lands into someone’s soup. Is throwing my ball into someone’s soup an action? Of course it is. The reason so is not that I had intended to do it, but that I had the intention of doing something (i.e., throwing the ball) the successful completion of which required me to take into account facts that I failed to take into account. Just because I didn’t mean to do it doesn’t mean I didn’t do it. So there is unintended action. The overriding point, however, is that I mean to do anything. If I cannot mean to do anything, because I lack the ability to form intentions, then I cannot be said to act.

4.7 The Content of Perception

I take it that the account of the content of action that I developed in the previous section is broadly Davidsonian in approach. Davidson calls belief/desire pairs “primary reasons” as against my calling them intentions, but I don’t think there are any deep disagreements here. This is because the agreement between them comes from my following Davidson in his emphasis with the extent that reasons determine (and indeed for Davidson cause) actions. And it is this point, in essence, that secures the conceptualist position with respect to the content of actions.

But then this means that my account of action is one that most philosophers of action would in general acknowledge. Broadly Davidsonian views—or, actually, those derived from the work of Anscombe, for she influenced Davidson—are the standard in contemporary philosophy of action.
Noting this, however, brings to mind what I have come to find a curiosity in accounts of perception. Action, at bottom and in very general terms, is a mind→world relation, in the sense that it is our means of making what we want to be the case in the world the case, of creating and changing both social and brute facts. Is perception a kind of mind-world relation as well? In the same very general terms that we just characterized action, the answer looks to be yes: perception is a world→mind relation, in the sense that it is our means of knowing what is the case so that we can sensibly think about the world. Importantly, we have to know what is so if we are to think about what we would like the world to be. Thus perceiving is a necessary part of grasping the facts.

Thinking about (1) the extent to which action involves reason and (2) the apparent symmetry in being directed mind/world relations, we will here ask: Is there a necessary role for reason (and thus necessary involvement in the space of reasons) in perception? If so, then here again the conceptualist position will have been secured.

As before, the argument turns on our ability to interact with social facts, but this time in perception. Do we see, hear, feel, or otherwise perceive the social facts or are they somehow constructed in the mind? For the simple simplistic beauty of it, we might prefer to say that if there already are social facts then why not hold that we simply perceive them, and thus hold that it is them which is a necessary part of the content of a perception? In the end, I think this is right, but not because of the simplicity of the thing. It is because we have already argued that the phenomenology of perceptual experience supports the idea that we perceive social facts (this was one of the upshots of Ch. 3). Not only that, but as I will argue below, an attractive epistemology results from holding that we perceive social facts, which further motivates our desire to see this result accepted.
Let me, then, state explicitly what I hold to be the theory of the content of perception. Assuming that we perceive social facts, there are right and wrong answers to which of us perceives which facts at a given time. Reasons for not perceiving a given social fact depend, obviously, on physical facts about the positions and capacities of our bodies, the positions and “perceiveability” of the facts given our particular kinds of sensible capacities, etc. But there are other reasons that, in symmetry to the theory of the content of action, concern our capacity to understand. Certain social facts can only be perceived given capacities to make sense of very detailed inferences about the facts in question. An example of Brandom’s concerns a scientist that can be said to perceive subatomic phenomena with the use of a cloud chamber by reliably differentially responding to the trails they leave. A more down to earth example would be for a mother to see that her infant has knocked a glass of water to the ground. The fact that the infant is hers, that the object was a glass of water, that it was “knocked” to the ground “by” the “infant,” are all social facts that she perceives in virtue of understanding what mothers, glasses, water, and infants are, along with her ability to conceive of another as an agent, and thus to perceive events as actions.

More specifically, then, the content of perception is constituted by the combination of (1) the facts (both social and brute) that are graspable at any given time by a subject’s sensibility (including things like body positioning, etc.) and (2) their capacity at the time (which includes both their (a) ability and (b) interest) in grasping each of those facts.

Consider an example: going back to our cyclist, imagine her to be coming up on the turn. What does she perceive as she does so? In fact we cannot answer this. The

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physical environment (the brute facts of the world) that we imagine her to be in would be needed to even begin characterizing the content of her perceptions. But each of us can imagine a space in front of ourselves as we read this as the place where the cyclist was. Look closely at it. Are there any pebbles there, any obstacles that she would have to go around or run over.

Now imagine her to be riding through that section. If there is nothing special about what is before her—no cloud chambers, say—then factoring in her perspective from the bike, and assuming that you two share the concepts that would be necessary in characterizing the facts of the scene before you, the content of her perception would be no different from yours. That is, if you can characterize the content of your perception in terms of (1) what is before you and (2) thinking about what a cyclist going through your area would be likely to recognize, you have (on my view) characterized the content of her perception as well. I think this is a good result.

One last point: must these processes—the processes of seeing (perceiving) that the world is thus and so—be seen as implicating or necessitating the involvement of reason? I think they must. If it were the case, contrary to how it seems, that all facts were brute facts, then perhaps we could maintain that reason has nothing to do with perception. But if we rather think that we also perceive social facts, and that all social facts exist relative to some space of reasons, then our characterizations of the content of our or another’s perceptual experiences must reference spaces of reasons as well. Another way to put it is to say that if perception is taking in that things are thus and so, and much of what we take in in this sense are social facts, then just as there is a sense in which world→mind relations are rational causal (in the Davidsonian sense), we need to make
sense of a way in which the world can rationally cause us to perceive that it is thus and so. Of course, we absolutely do not want to attribute to the world intentions, to say that it does anything in the sense that we are said to act. So we need to be careful here. The solution lies in reminding ourselves what it means to say that the world has a factual nature and that some of the facts are social. Social facts exist relative to and because of the space of reasons. If we can make sense of the idea that those states of the world lead to the world being other ways (to other states of affairs), then we just are making sense of rational causation in the way proposed here.

4.8 The Content of Thoughts

The previous two sections have outlined, respectively, my account of the content of actions and my account of the content of perceptions. Both have assumed a necessary, constitutive role for the ways things are in the world. It’s worth being clear that facts are not themselves going to exhaust the content of a subject’s experience, however, so that we could say that a fact was the only content of an action or perception. The most we can say is that a fact is a constituting element of the content of actions and perceptions as such. Why? Because both have also assumed a necessary, and, again, constitutive, role for the understanding, or for the capacity of the subject in question to understand the significance (what even in natural language we call “the implications”) of what they do and perceive. It is these elements which do most of the work securing the conceptualist position with respect to action and perception. Perception and action have the contents they do because they are caught up with each other and with the cognizing of subjects.
One last account remains to be developed, then, before we can be said to have shown that the conceptualist position is true of the content of experience as such, and not just some parts of it. The account in question is one concerning the content of thought inasmuch as part of what it is to experience is to think. There is probably much that a phenomenologist could tell us about how pure thinking (separate from perception and action) should be characterized, but it is doubtful that there is any plausible argument showing that it is possible to think while wholly and forever distinguished from perception and action. Inasmuch as thinking is a rational enterprise, correction in connection to the space of reasons is necessary. Rational human thought—and thus most of the content that we would be concerned to characterize—is related to the world through both perception and action.\textsuperscript{31}

For instance, to characterize our cyclist’s mental state as she takes the turn is, at least, to characterize her as both perceiving the space and certain details wherein she takes the turn and as acting to do this as opposed to that when she takes it. On both accounts, there are certain brute and social facts that would be constituents in characterizing these mental states. There is also clearly a connection or coordination between perception and action such that if it were lacked it would in fact rule out our being able to attribute just that content to the “perceptions” and “actions” of the agent in question. It is an aspect of this coordination that we are trying to characterize when we say that we are characterizing the content of her thought inasmuch as we mean to keep it separate from simply her perceptions and actions.

\textsuperscript{31} This is not to say that irrational human thought, or rational divine thought, or even rational animal thought (depending on what we mean by “rational”) can exist which does not relate in this way to perception and action. I am talking about empirical thought.
If this is right, then we should perhaps wonder when a characterization of the content of a subject’s thought would not include a characterization of the content of his or her perceptions and actions as well. Perhaps it’s unnecessary for an account to deal with this. More importantly, this makes clear the extent to which the account is one about the nature of the coordination between perception and action.

Now, though I don’t think I’ve made this case yet, I would like to be able to claim that thought just is the coordination of the contents of perceptions and action. True, these coordinations can be very complex owing to fact that many of them take place over long stretches of time and space. But, or so the claim goes, all of them are characterizable as (1) attempted determinations to fit desires to beliefs into a belief.desire pair that leads to action, (2) to fit beliefs to desires by attempting to grasp the facticity of the world, or (3) some combination of the two.

That said, I do think I’ve made a case for thought at least being the coordination of perception and action, and necessarily so, which is enough to secure a conceptualist position with respect to it. For example, in thinking about how much I like my new cell phone, seeing as how it’s so sleek, sturdy, and functional, I could, perhaps, entertain this possibility in abstract by never testing any of my assumptions about it. But only for limited amounts of time, it seems, insofar as I have to use my cell phone to do all sorts of things like call people, take photos, and fit it nicely into my briefcase or front jeans pocket without breaking. What I think of the object, and thus which facts I can believe about it, as well as the details which spell out my desires for it, are constantly tested by what happens when I perceive and act with the phone itself in the context of everyday activities.
At bottom, the important point for us is that these coordinating efforts are rational processes (even when they are not done very well\(^{32}\)) that make essential use of the contents of perception and action. Indeed, I think we can be more precise here by saying that it is thought that accounts for the involvement of perception and action in the space of reasons. Why? Because perception and action do not really have content apart from the coordinating efforts of thought. But we also want to say that (counterfactually) were no connections to the world in perception and action, no sets of brute and social facts that played a necessary constitutive role in the “content” of perception and action, that there would be nothing to coordinate in thought beyond the mere mutual coherence of imaginations.

In summary, at this point, we’ve given accounts of the content of perception, action, and thought that seek (1) to show how they each incorporate the facts of the world, (2) show how each necessarily implicates the space of reasons, and (3) show how they relate to each other. This almost completely discharges the task of offering an account of the content of adult, human experience. The last move is to show that, thus combined, these three accounts amount to an account of the content of experience as such. We do this because someone might think that experience is more than this.

That there is not is partly a phenomenological claim. We would want to know, What other elements of our experiences are not covered in these accounts? The claim is that there are no such elements. That we have endorsed a “robust” notion of experience might lead some to ask if that robustness implies that there are going to be elements of experience that are not accounted for. This would misunderstand the way in which pre-

\(^{32}\) I.e., we do not mean “rational” in the sense of well-considered.
cisely those things which we said made experience robust have been appealed to in con-
structing these accounts.\textsuperscript{33} We said that experience is robust in that it is the facts that we
perceive, act upon, and think. What makes our account robust is not that we recognize
other “facets” (as it were) to experience, but that it is the facticity of the world that we
said we should appeal to in characterizing the contents of experience. This is precisely
what we have done. (We’ll come back to these points in §4.10 below.)

4.9 \hspace{1em} The Epistemology of Robust Experience

Dialectically, the situation is this. If the account developed here is right, then the
conceptualist should be feeling pretty good about herself. We have not, strictly speaking,
given the full argument as to why conceptualism is implied by these accounts of the con-
tent of experience. But all that needs to be done now is to rearrange some of the theses
that have already been argued for, to put them into the right context.

Before we get to that, however, we should finish up our discussion of the robust
notion of experience by discussing its epistemology and phenomenology. This would
only be fair, for we’ll have used the same sets of issues when considering the worth of
each notion of experience on its own. Of course, I also believe that the robust notion of
experience makes a good showing in these discussions, so it’s something I’m happy dis-
cussing. We’ll focus on the epistemology of the robust notion of experience in this sec-
tion and its phenomenology in the next.

When we last talked about explicitly epistemological questions we were discuss-
ing the merits and problems of the conceptually structured presentation view (the third of

\textsuperscript{33} This point is methodological and concerns the construction of the arguments of this essay.
four notions of experience). As for its merits, the fact that it posits an identity between the objects of experience and the objects of knowledge points to the way in which we can do away with the fidelity inference, which, recall, we liked on account of the fact that the fidelity inference has been such a difficult problem for so long. Of course, if objects, and not states of affairs, were the proper objects of knowledge, then the conceptually structured presentation view would suffice. But we want to be able to say that states of affairs are objects of knowledge too, perhaps even that they are the only proper objects of (empirical) knowledge. We cannot do this on the conceptually structured presentation view of experience. But it should be obvious that we can by holding the robust notion of experience as developed above.

Another problem that I raised for the epistemology of the conceptual presentation view is that it looks like a version of the myth of the given. As I put it, it posits an unworkable distinction between the interpretative and un-interpretative (or given) elements of experience that undercuts the status of all knowledge derived from experience. The unworkable distinction is actually unworkable for many reasons. Not only does it lead to an epistemically useless notion of “the given element of experience” but it does so at the expense of a coherent account of the role of reason in the construction of experiential content.

Let’s be more precise about what the unworkable distinction is. The distinction is between the objects which are uninterpretively given to experience and the facts that such and such is the case which are objects of knowledge that we take to be to be inferred from the proper objects of experience. Not only do I want to reject the idea that such processes need to take place, on the grounds that we experience facts and not objects. I
want to reject any suggestion that the notion of interpreting be the central element in an account of the role of reason in the construction of the content of thought. The content of thought (as distinguished from perception and action) is characterized in terms of processes of coordination between what we perceive and what we do. Such processes are many and complex, but importantly they are informed by, responsive to, the space of reasons. Whether or not some of these processes are best described as interpretative is an open question. But I would not want to try to offer an account of coordination that assumed a prior notion of interpretation. Interpretation is a costly mental process, and we burden thought too much if we insist that coordination be done only after a prior process of interpretation of the contents of perception and action. (We’ll expand on this point in the next section.)

Some might ask: Assuming that the robust notion of experience were to be adopted, what would an epistemology that assumed it look like? We can answer this question by thinking about what it would really mean if we experienced the same type of thing that we could know. It would put an end to certain long-standing epistemological skepticisms. If I am seeing that a glass is on the table, it is because there is a glass on the table. Since there is no interpretative processes to be posited here, there is no gap from which to base the skeptical point. The more interesting epistemological questions would seem to be of a different sort than this. One might be: under which circumstances can I not be said to take in that things are thus and so and therefore be said to have no empirical knowledge of the world? Such accounts would speak to the content of illusions and hallucinations, and explain why these provide us with no knowledge of the world (in a sense), but perhaps only knowledge of ourselves as subject in the world. Questions of
justification, then, are still central to an epistemology of robust experience. They just start from the assumption of knowledge and ask what goes wrong when knowledge goes missing.

Another point to be made along these lines is that when we are asking what is going wrong we would be asking about breakdowns in the processes of coordination. As I’ve already stated, of necessity some of these will concern the normative, social space of reasons. Sometimes (in fact very often) coordinating perception and action will involve doing what is justifiable in the space of reasons of one’s reason-exchanging community. As I see it, that we have uncovered such processes offers a foundation of sorts for what seems to be an increasingly popular epistemological position: normative epistemology. Some normative epistemologists have assumed that knowing is something like a “social status,” though we needn’t go this far. All I want to claim is that, if one likes such accounts, it counts strongly in the favor of the account of mental content developed here that it makes this connection.

### 4.10 The Phenomenology of Robust Experience

Recall that our main criticism of the phenomenology of the conceptual presentation view of experience is that it could not accommodate this Heideggerian point: it is ubiquitous in our experience that the world offers us affordances for acting. This is a problem for the conceptually structured presentation view inasmuch as affordances are a kind of state of affairs of the world (a kind which is necessarily characterized relative to

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34 See, e.g., Brandom 1994, Ch. 4, §2. There he calls knowledge a “complex deontic status, in the sense that it involves both commitment and entitlement” (202). The knower of F is committed to the implications of F and entitled to assert F as something known.
the subject) and it does not make room for the idea that any states of affairs of the world are experienced. It should not be a challenge for the reader to see how the robust notion of experience handles the general Heideggerian point nicely in holding facts to be the objects of experience.

But there is more that one could draw from the Heideggerian point to challenge the plausibility of the phenomenology of robust experience. It is surely an important part of the Heidggerian insight that it does not take us much (to speak loosely) mental effort to experience these affordances. Indeed, one might understand the point (strongly) as saying that it takes no mental effort to experience these affordances according to a proper phenomenology. Such affordances are simply there for us, and we simply fall into them like I fall into my couch without thinking about it when I get home from a long day of teaching and doing philosophy.

Put into our vernacular, the strong Heideggerian claim amounts to a denial that thought plays any role in the coordination of the content of perception and action, which would mean that coordination takes place below the level of thought (and therefore reason). The weak claim, however, is that whatever coordinating goes on at the level of thought it is minimal to the point of near-invisibility to the sensitive phenomenologist of experience. Given these options, it should not be a surprise that I (qua defender of the robust notion of experience) reject the strong reading of the Heideggerian point on the grounds that it assumes an understanding of thought that I have already rejected: the interpretational account of thought whereby the contents of perception and action are coordinated (and thus made empirically meaningful) in terms more general than merely interpretational.
On my view, it is perfectly rational for us to coordinate what we see when we in fact see a chair before us with a generic intention to sit in it. All things being equal, it costs us almost nothing to sit in it and the fact that we are off our feet for a bit may be an advantage later. Given that we are not truly concerned with the skeptical worries of the traditional epistemologist, that we would assume a great many coordinations between perception and action seems obvious. Of course, these coordinations would themselves be relative to our situation (our embeddedness in the social and physical facticity of the world). If a subject were being chased by a bear, and fearing for his life, the couch would not appear to him as an inviting place to sit. At best it would be a mere obstacle, something to avoid getting tripped over; at worst it would be something for the subject to pull himself out of when his attempt to avoid it failed.

This suggests an embeddedness of situational affordances in our phenomenology. While it is true that some affordances are so automatic as to seem almost “mindless,” the fact that which affordances these are changes depending on what the situation is shows that the story must be more complicated than the strong reading of Heidegger’s point suggests. We may be able to characterize much of what we do in terms that are so seemingly insignificant that we might think them mindless. But the fact that we are just as quickly responsive in treating the different affordances of things as quickly in less commonplace situations must also be accounted for. My suggestion is that we understand Heidegger’s point in the weak sense. It takes very little cognitive effort to coordinate some actions with some perceptions and vice versa, but this does not amount to saying that it takes none. This reading is supported to the extent that sensitive phenomenology finds that though much of what happens rationally when we coordinate perception and
action is quick and seamless, it is not altogether removed from rationality. We still act skillfully, and in response to social facts, so the question is how. My claim is that if in the end we still have to make reference to the space of reasons, still make reference to practices of reason giving and taking, then these processes are necessarily rational and the content we attribute to the results of these coordinating activities is rational as well.  

One other point concerning the phenomenology of robust experience. Earlier, I expressed my commitment to the possibility of what I called *generic experiences*. So-called fineness of grain arguments that purport to show that we can’t capture in concepts all the fine-grained content of certain perceptual experiences fail to convince us that our experience has this kind of precise content in the first place. It may well be that my experiences are *generic*. Now some will point out that there is nothing generic about, say, the shade of that red door in front of one. It is a precise shade of red, even when one doesn’t know what it’s called. But then here’s where anti-representationalism (which is tied to the view that the world is its own best model) comes into play. When we let the world be its own best model, it will always ever be as precise as it is whenever we undertake to examine it. Saying that experience is generic isn’t to say that it isn’t fine-grained. It’s only to say that it isn’t fine-grained when it isn’t needed to be so.

We can apply this point generally to the question of the content of experience. To go back to our cyclist again, she doesn’t (let us suppose) need to concern herself with either hitting or avoiding such small objects as the pebble she kicks up on the turn. For this reason she (qua expert) generally does not form an intention concerning pebbles of that

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35 But only in part; the world plays a role too, keep in mind.
36 See §2.4.
37 See §4.5 above.
size. In our example, she seeks more generically to take the turn. And if a pebble gets kicked up along the way so be it. What’s nice about being able to say this is that it shows how we can make sense of the content of our actions being as generic as the content of our perceptions. It is very possible that since she is not concerned with pebbles of this size she does next to nothing in thought to ensure coordination of her perceptions of such pebbles with her effort to turn the bike.

In the end, I maintain that the robust notion of experience can account for the Heideggerian point, properly spelled out. Not only that, but since it was developed in reaction to and in that sense out of the phenomenologies of the other views, it can claim possession of whatever insightful phenomenological points they make.

4.11 Conclusion (or, How Robust Experience Implies Conceptualism)

At this point, all that is left to do is to make explicit the way in which the conceptualist position is secured if the robust notion of experience is adopted. All this should already be clear, so this is little more than a summary for most readers. But I wanted to make sure this point was as clear as I could make it so that the punch line of the essay will not have gotten lost.

Though it might be misleading to say so, it seems to me that it is the social externalist theses central to the view that drive the push toward conceptualism. By externalist theses I mean the views that states of affairs themselves, and not representations of them, play a role in constituting mental content. And I take there to be two such theses: social

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38 I take it that this way of characterizing externalism captures the intuitions behind Putnam’s and Burge’s externalist points as well. It doesn’t matter how the subject represents water—as XYZ or as
and physical, depending on the kind of fact that is in question, social or brute. That the world has a factual nature could be accepted without embracing conceptualism if one were to suppose that all facts were brute facts. (This would then mean that whatever perception is, “Seeing that x” would be a brute fact about a subject as well.) But when we suppose that there are ways the world is that are dependent upon the practices of giving and asking for reasons that humans uniquely engage in, we need an account which explains how it is that we perceive and act upon them. This means that one must characterize experiential states by reference to the normative space of reasons. And then, according to the theory of concepts that we adopted in §4 of this chapter, this means that we must characterize mental states by reference to the space of concepts, and thus as necessarily conceptual in character.

I say that it might be misleading to say this because I do not want to imply that there are kinds of mental content which are wholly free from the social, thus leaving open the possibility that there are some experiences whose contents could be characterized independently of the social. For instance, I see no room for the possibility of an experience that could be characterized as looking at something which was wholly physical but still wholly unknown or unconceptualizable for her, so that the perceiver would have to be said to experience it as something independently of the space of reasons. I don’t want to abandon physical externalist points. I only want to say that, in the end, the distinction between the physical externalist and the social externalist elements of the content of an experience are not fully separable, but are rather always combined together. The only

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\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad \text{or how she represents arthritis. There are other facts of the matter that determine the meaning of what she says, in the former case brute facts and the latter case social facts.}
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discernable differences between the contents of different experiences would be ones of degree. If this is right, then it isn’t so much that social externalism implies conceptualism but that the truth of social externalism is a good reason for holding the conceptualist position. I hope to have shown in this and the previous chapter that this is the case.
CHAPTER 5:

Criticisms and Replies

5.1 Introduction

There are many theorists whose work intersects with the main issues discussed in the present work, and in the debate over the place of nonconceptual content more generally. We’ve examined some of the most influential, but have had to leave many to the side. In this final chapter, I’d like rectify this somewhat by considering objections from two theorists whose positions are very close to mine in important senses, but who then adopt a nonconceptualist position: Susan Hurley and Hubert Dreyfus. As I will show, Hurley’s argument against conceptualism by way of a consideration of the notion of islands of rationality falls prey to a vicious circularity. Against Dreyfus, I argue that while our experience is often “mindless,” one needn’t see mindlessness in his sense as foundational with respect to the contents of experience.

5.2 Hurley on Practical Reasons

With the publication of her *Consciousness in Action*, Susan Hurley sought to bring to attention what she saw as a serious flaw in the status quo with respect to the treatment of perception, consciousness, and action. The “Input-Output Picture of perception and action”—where perception is analyzed as an input to a consciousness cognitive

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1 Hurley 1998.
system while action is analyzed as the output—cannot work as an account of these capacities and their relations to one another. Such capacities are more complex, and more highly entangled with one another, than has traditionally been supposed. Current interest in the relationship between perception and action in such works as Alva Noë’s *Action in Perception*\(^2\) attests, I take it, to Hurley’s influence. And indeed, I count some of the details of my account of action as influenced by Hurley as well. I, too, want to say that action is not to be analyzed as the simple output of a cognitive system. The questions that most tellingly separate us concern the ways in which we hold perception and action to work together in the formation of content.\(^3\)

We can get at these differences by discussing what is perhaps Hurley’s most direct attack on conceptualism: her discussion of Bill Brewer’s extended argument for conceptualism (Brewer 1999), “Overintellectualizing the Mind.”\(^4\) Though we’ve already discussed Brewer’s response to the fineness of grain arguments,\(^5\) we’ve yet to sketch in any detail his epistemologically motivated conceptualism. To see the force (or lack thereof) of Hurley’s argument, we should do that first.

Brewer’s argument for conceptualism has two parts: (1) “Perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs.”\(^6\) He calls this claim “R.” And (2) “Reasons require conceptual contents,” which he calls “C.”\(^7\) The first half of his 1999 contains his discus-

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\(^2\) Noë 2005.

\(^3\) I suspect that another source of difference between us would be that I am concerned with the characterization of mental states not only by the theorist (the psychologist, say) but in more everyday situations, situations in which all cognitive creatures find themselves.

\(^4\) Hurley 2001. This article was one of a couple in response to a précis of Brewer’s 1999 in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (2).

\(^5\) §2.5

\(^6\) Brewer 1999, 18.

\(^7\) *Ibid.*, 149.
sion of R, while the second half contains his discussion of C. A quick gloss of each should suffice for our purposes here.

His argument for is R complex, but he spends much of his time with showing that adopting R can get us out of a sticky situation, namely a Strawsonian\(^8\) argument concerning the possibility of *massive reduplication*.\(^9\) Roughly, the Strawsonian worry is that a “purely descriptive Idea”\(^10\) could not suffice to characterize the content of an experience because of the *permanent epistemic possibility*\(^11\) of a massively reduplicated world. If there were such world, a descriptive Idea would be true both of our world and of this other world as well. As a result, any belief formed on the basis of the descriptive Idea would be ambiguous, and would have become non-empirical as a result. On Brewer’s view, R answers the Strawson Argument inasmuch as perceptual experiences are—as we might say—*tied* to that part in which the subject is embedded. Demonstrative concepts, such as THAT DISTANCE, or THAT SHADE OF RED refer to (are tied to) particular distances or shades of red in *our* world, not that other *doppelgänger* world, in virtue of that fact that we, and not our *doppelgängers*, are in *this* world.

Brewer’s argument for C works by deriving from (i) the fact that reason and inference are connected as well as (ii) the subjectivity of reason (i.e., that reasons are always *reasons for* a subject) that reason requires concepts. Concepts are just the sort of

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\(^8\) Strawson 1959.

\(^9\) Brewer uses what he calls the “Strawson Argument” to secure a premise in his argument for R that “The most basic beliefs about the spatial world have their contents only in virtue of their standing in certain relations with perceptual experiences” (xiv). Important for us is the idea that the content of a certain sort of belief is fixed by relations to perceptual experiences. This makes it vital that the perceptual experiences have a content to which empirical beliefs can be related, and a *worldiness* that can be shared via that relationship.


\(^11\) Brewer 1999, xv.
thing that drives inference; indeed, it can be hard to imagine an inferential engine which doesn’t operate according to the functions of concepts. And since concepts are things \textit{had by} subjects, the subjectivity of reason is easily founded on the having of concepts. A subject has a reason to believe \(x\) so-and-sos (or does \(y\)) only when she possesses the concept of \(x\).\textsuperscript{12} As Brewer puts it, in a nice characterization that puts \(R\) and \(C\) together:

\begin{quote}
...a person has a reason for believing something only if she is in some mental state or other with a representational content which is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject herself must possess and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a premise or the conclusion of a deductive inference, or of an inference of some other kind (e.g. inductive, or abductive).\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Now, the root of Hurley’s criticisms is that Brewer’s analysis of content is driven too much by the epistemology of belief, and as a result over-emphasis the place of reason in experience. If Brewer were to understand the role that \textit{action} plays in consciousness, he would not hold to conceptualism. Conceptualism cannot be true because there is content which is not conceptual.

According to Hurley, the content of an action is closely tied to what she calls—in contrast to epistemic \textit{reasons to believe}—practical \textit{reasons to act}. She fully accepts that perceptual beliefs (i.e., beliefs about what we perceive) are caused by reasons to believe available to us in perceptual experience. And she even seems willing to let these reasons be conceptual. However, she resists the view that reasons to act are conceptual. She frames the point generally as a denial that, in all cases, “reasons require conceptual contents.”\textsuperscript{14} Reasons to believe may; but reasons to act do not.

\textsuperscript{12} \ldots though she will of course need \textit{more} than the concept of \(x\) to have the belief that \(x\) so-and-sos.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, xvi.

\textsuperscript{14} 2002, 25.
Here’s how Hurley puts the points I’ve just rehearsed:

Suppose we grant that nonconceptual content is not needed to provide an epistemological grounding for perceptual beliefs, and that indeed it could not do this work in any case. This will only seem decisive on the issues of whether reasons require conceptual contents if we have already overintellectualized the mind by giving epistemology priority over practical reason. If there is a case for giving either priority, reasons for action are primary and reasons for belief derivative. Even if reasons for belief must be conceptual, it would not follow that reasons for actions must be, since reasons for action are not reasons for belief about what should be done. … An intentional agent who lacks conceptual abilities and does not conceptualize her reasons can still act for reasons that are her own, from her point of view.15

Now, one should ask: Why don’t reasons to act “require conceptual contents” (or, as she puts it later in the essay “conceptual abilities”16)? On Hurley’s view, it’s because there is a sharp distinction between “practical reason” and “theoretical reason.”17 As she sees it, there are cognitive creatures that are responsive to the demands of practical reason (they are reason responsive to reasons to act) but not to theoretical reason (they are non-reason-responsive to reasons to believe).

A possibly troubling implication of her view is that such creatures should be accountable for their actions but not their beliefs. They can’t help believing what they believe, but can help doing what they do. Indeed, perhaps it even makes sense to say of them that they have no beliefs (since they are not responsive to reasons to believe P over not-P) yet that they are still actors in the full sense of the term. Now, this isn’t central to my response to Hurley, but I can’t help registering some discomfort here. Cutting off action from belief in this way looks to do serious violence to some widely shared intuitions

16 Ibid., 31.
17 This explains her contention that Brewer is barking up the wrong tree in thinking like an epistemologist when it comes to questions of content.
about responsibility. I have a really hard time understanding how someone could be responsible for any action if we must say that they are not responsible for any of their beliefs. If a person were to have no beliefs about handguns, then could we blame them for killing someone with one? After all, they didn’t know pulling the trigger could result in someone’s death. This apparent conflict with entrenched moral judgements suggests to me that Hurley is on the wrong track in her accounts of perception and action.

But there is another difficulty with Hurley’s account, one more relevant to the present essay. Setting aside for the moment the relationship between reasons to believe and reasons to act, it’s worth asking why she thinks the latter are nonconceptual. To this issue, she says:

Acting for a reason, rather than merely in the presence of or in agreement with a reason, requires the reason to cause the action in the right sort of way. But this does not require the reflective, context-free, inferentially promiscuous understanding of the reason that goes with conceptual abilities.\(^{18}\)

In other words, conceptual abilities are abilities that can be exercised in a number of important ways. They are: (1) reflectively exercised, by which I take it she means exercised with some deliberation; (2) context-free, not bound to any particular scenario in the exercising; and, related to (2), (3) inferentially promiscuous, i.e., in fact exercised in a wide-range of possible scenarios.

Two questions here: First, are these good marks of the conceptual versus the nonconceptual? And second, what grounds are there for holding that reasons to act lack such marks? Let’s take the second question first.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 26.
Hurley’s argument that reasons to act lack the marks of the conceptual is that there are, as she calls them, “islands of rationality” in the behavior of subjects. There are situations where a subject will act for a reason—a reason which is her own—yet fail to act for that reason in situations which rationally demand the same response. Islands of rationality, as I understand it, are best identified as situations. They compel subjects to perform an act—call it A—that they in fact do not otherwise perform when not, to speak somewhat metaphorically, “on” the island itself. The fact that actions have content that can be characterized in this way shows, for Hurley, that their content cannot be conceptual inasmuch they fail to display the three marks of conceptuality for exercised abilities (i.e., reflective, context-free, inferentially-promiscuous exercising).

An example will be given in a moment. But note first that it’s important for Hurley’s argument that there be some identifiable act (which we’ve here called A) that the subject have reason to do, both on an island of rationality and off. There must be some situation in which the subject recognizes and acts for that reason and some other situation where the subject does not. This is the point of saying that there are different situations that nevertheless demand identical responses. It is only inasmuch as this identity holds that Hurley can talk about one and the same capacity being used in certain situations and not in others, for capacities are manifested in behavior. I point this out now because it is this that I think Hurley fails to demonstrate with her examples of so-called islands of rationality. At any rate, let’s look at one such “island” now.

As an example of an island of rationality, Hurly asks us to consider, among other things, the implications of work done by Sarah Boysen and her associates on the rationality (through the use of numbers) of chimpanzees. As reported in Boysen, Bernston,
Hannan, and Cacioppo 1996,19 Boysen and her team found “a rather striking training failure” when a certain “reversed reinforcement contingency” was used in the sharing of food in various tasks.20 One such task was as follows: Two chimps are to share some candies (chocolate-covered peanuts). One chimp, the selector chimp, selects one of two dishes of candies. The selected dish goes to the other, passive observer chimp. Given that the chimps found the candies highly desirable, the “optimal response strategy” for the selector chimp was to select the dish with the smaller number of candies, since only by doing so would she attain the maximum possible number of candies.21 This is the rational behavior, the A that the chimp has reason to perform. The problem was that none of the chimps in her lab were able to adopt the optimal response strategy and perform A when faced with this task, even when it caused them “considerable behavioral distress (e.g., vocalizations and striking the [testing] apparatus)” then, as a result of their own action, to see the larger number of candies go to the observer chimp and not to them.22

Now perhaps this isn’t so striking on its own. A natural thing to say here is that the chimps never really caught on to the nature of this game. Perhaps they never (much to their annoyance) understood its rules. If so, the question is: Why can’t chimps play this game?

What’s so striking, though, is that when chimps (such as Boysen’s chimp Sheba) that had been trained to recognize and use Arabic numerals were asked to play a similar

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19 Boysen and Bernston 1995 is where this training failure was originally reported, and we’ll be referring to some of the details of the experiment that were made clear in this earlier paper than in the later one, but the later paper is interesting as well due to the explanation of the training failure that they provide there.

20 Boysen, Bernston, Hannan, and Cacioppo 1996, 76.

21 As best I can tell, there was no optimal response strategy for the observer chimp, even though Boysen describes the two chimps as “working together” (ibid.).

22 As reported in Boysen and Bernston 1995.
game they were able to adopt the optimal response strategy and perform A. The game was this: All of the food sharing rules for this second game were the same. But instead of picking dishes of candies with certain numbers of candies in them, Sheba picked numerals representing the numbers of candies in the dishes. The optimal response strategy, as in the first task, was to select the smallest number of candies as that which went to the observer chimp. When she selected the smaller number, the larger number of candies went to her (presumably much to her delight). And interestingly, when Sheba went back to playing the first game after mastering the second game (or at least performing well above chance on it), she reverted back to her poor (in fact, below chance) performance on it.

Assuming as Boysen does that these games are not just similar but, in fact, identical in virtue of (1) enforcing the same food sharing rules, as well as (2) letting the choices concern the numbers of candies themselves, the question for her was, What explains the numerically-literate chimp’s ability to perform optimally only when numerals are used (but not when the candies themselves are used)? Boysen and her associates have an answer here. They suggest that “the intrinsic properties of the candy array stimuli invoked an evaluative disposition that interfered with optimal performance.” In other words, the chimps are overwhelmed by the sight of the bigger pile of candies and choose it even when, according to the food sharing rules established for the game, they will get the smaller pile. They can’t help themselves. But take the candies out of sight and represent their numbers with Arabic numerals and they can keep their heads straight. The rational voice (represented by the “numerical capacities” which one are of the “cognitive mechanisms” referred to in the title of Boysen and Bernston 1995) can easily be trumped by the

23 Ibid., 86. This same answer is reaffirmed in Boysen, Bernston, Hannan, and Cacioppo 1996.
irrational voice (that of the “perceptual mechanisms”) when the intrinsic property of, I suppose, yumminess is involved.

Perhaps this is right. Perhaps not. Regardless what matters for Hurley is that Boyesen has uncovered here an island of rationality and thus demonstrated how action cannot have conceptual content. Sheba is no doubt acting for a reason in both versions of the game. But inasmuch as she cannot perform A given two situations which call for it, her performing of it in the second game fails the test of conceptuality. Her performance of A is not context-independent nor inferentially-promiscuous, regardless of how deliberate and rational it appears to otherwise be.

Hurley’s discussion is unclear on some points, however. I’ve presented her as arguing that Sheba’s action in the second game is nonconceptual inasmuch as it lacks the marks of conceptuality. It’s possible, however, that she would in fact admit to the conceptuality of this act, but then argue that what is rather shown by this example is that all action can have conceptual content inasmuch as A is not performed in the first game when it should be, but can be understood as conceptual in the second game.

Either way, her argument works by comparing the situations in each game and finding them suitably similar so as to call for the same action. Only in doing so can she claim to have identified an island of rationality. The problem is that it isn’t at all clear that she is entitled to such assumptions without begging the question.

There are two related questions to address here. (1) Why assume the two games played by Boyesen’s chimps are, in another sense, two versions of the same game? (2) Why think that there is one A that is successfully performed in the second game and not the first? Concerning (1), Hurley’s answer seems to be that (a) both games use the same
rules along with the idea that (b) it is the number of candies in both cases that determine the application of the rules as well as characterize the outcome. Concerning (2), because there is only one game being played here (in two versions) there is only one A (i.e., the optimal response) elicited in both versions of the game. It is: pick the lower number of candies so as to get the greater number.

It appears to me, however, that Hurley has fallen into a trap similar to the one Dretske fell into when he confused what is seen with what is there to be seen.24 Concerning (1b), just because it is the number of candies that determines the outcomes in both versions of the game does not force the conclusion that Sheba is herself responding to the number of jellybeans in both cases. In one case, one might say, she is responding to a selection of numerals and in the other case she is responding to dishes of candies. This suggests that though the rules are functionally similar in both versions of the game as is suggested in (1a), Sheba has not necessarily caught onto the fact that the rules of the two versions of the game are the same in this sense. The result is that, concerning (2), there is no firm ground for insisting that there is one and the same A that is called for by both versions of the game from Sheba’s perspective unless one simply assumes this to be the case in virtue of our understanding of Sheba’s task.

If one had to diagnose where Hurley has gone wrong here in insisting that Sheba is playing the game that she (Hurley) understands her to be playing in both cases, then, in something of a mirror-image of Dretske’s mistake, Hurley looks to have confused what is done with what is there to be done. In this way, she has mis-characterized the contents of Sheba’s action. There is little ground for insisting that there are islands of rationality in

24 §2.4.
Sheba’s behavior unless she’s already assumed as much. Hurley’s thought is that Sheba knows the better but does the worse when it comes to picking a food dish. She knows that the dish that she picks will go to the observer chimp; but she just can’t help it. Using the numerals allows her to behave rationally in what she herself recognizes as the same game as the one that does not use the numerals.

An alternative explanation which does not make such an assumption, however, is that Sheba is simply playing two different games. In one case, she picks the dish of candies that she wants. In another, she picks the smaller number and gets rewarded with candy. Hurley and Boysen want to insist that Sheba is playing the same game in both cases, and that the differences in context that results from swapping dishes of candies with numerals is resulting in a difference in Sheba’s ability to what is rationality demands (i.e., pick the option which gives her the greater number of candies). But if we can characterize Sheba’s actions as the playing of two games, then Hurley cannot insist that Sheba is playing the same game in both cases without begging the question. We can rather say that the changes in context amount, for Sheba, to a change in what game is being played.

Indeed, I think this is what we must say inasmuch as we have already agreed that even nonconceptualists seek to uphold the first part of the conceptual constraint.25 We said that we would characterize the contents of experience “in ways that are sensitive to how the subject in question actually experiences the world.” Hurley has not done this. And doing so puts her islands of rationality picture out of reach.

25 §1.4
Note something else about Hurley’s account. If the space of reasons and the space of concepts are identical, as I have argued they are (see §4.4), to say that motor intentions are caused by reasons is to say that they are conceptual in the relevant sense. There are, of course, questions as to precisely what this identity means. But one thing it most certainly does not mean is that the conceptual is always, or even best, characterized as “reflective,” “context-free,” and “inferentially promiscuous” as Hurley holds. My claim is rather is that concepts allow the subject to grasp states of affairs in the world, in perception, in thought, and in action to the extent that we act (in the full sense) in accordance with our beliefs, desires, and what the facts are. On this view, concepts are just as unreflective, context-bound, and inferentially chaste as they need to be so as to meet the subject’s needs in dealing skillfully with the world.

Brewer has expressed displeasure at Hurley’s marks of the conceptual himself. He said in a response to Hurley’s symposium article that Hurley moves at various points, from the fact that an agent’s capacities are “context-bound” in some way, lacking complete context-independent generality, or “decompositional structure”, to the conclusion that there are therefore not conceptual capacitates. The inference is, in my view, or should I say on my definition of the conceptual, invalid. For, as I admit quite explicitly throughout, demonstrative capacities are context-bound, in the sense that their exercise depends upon actually standing, or having stood, in certain perceptual attentional relations with the relevant worldly objects. Yet these are conceptual capacities, since they figure in the contents of judgements serving as the premises or conclusions of inferences of various kinds. Indeed these are precisely the conceptual capacities which are my central concern throughout.

I want to agree with Brewer here on some points and distance myself on others. My notion of a concept is closer to Brewer’s than it is to Hurley’s; conceptual capacities are

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26 Brewer 2001b.
27 Ibid., 53.
very much context-bound. Indeed, I take this to be the result of holding a holism about concepts, and it makes sense if we accept the idea that the world is (socially and physically) factive. But I disagree with Brewer that the conceptual capacities are conceptual because they figure in the contents of judgments serving as premises or conclusions of inferences. It is true that they do. But this is not explanatory of their being conceptual.

Consider this example: I take it that a reason to act can be that such and such is the case, that, e.g., there is a pebble in the road ahead of me that were I to hit it I would skid out and hit the pavement. That is, the actual state of affairs in the world can be a reason for me to do something. Of course, the fact that were I to hit that pebble (and in the context of my already having grasped the fact) I would hit pavement provides me with a reason to act only given that I do not want to hit the pavement. Why would I not want that? Because I believe that it would hurt and because I don’t like pain; because I suspect a fall at this speed might break bones, and I don’t want to go through that; etc. (There are many more examples here.) The important point is that the reason I steer around the pebble that will cause me to hit the ground is that very fact itself. If this is right, then even though grasping that fact contributes to my steering around the pebble, the reason can be the fact itself and not the judgment.

Being clear on this helps to further characterize my anti-propositionalism as well as show how my conceptualism differs from Brewer’s. Note that this kind of response

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28 …which I understand as a combination of anti-sententialism and anti-representationalism…

29 Though the judgment plays a necessary role in the action, I think of the judgment as somehow transparent in cases where we are seeking a reason for an action. This is because we are concerned to give an account of the content of an action, not an account of the mechanisms that account for the action taking place, etc. As a result, we rely on different evidence here, evidence that has to do with what would count as a good reason to act in real world situations. For example, if someone asked, “Why did you suddenly move to the left there?” the best answer would be something like “Because of the pebble that would have put me
to Hurley is beyond Brewer, for (as is evident in the previous quote above) he holds that it is “worldly objects” like “spatially extended and located particulars and their changing properties over time,” that we grasp in perceptual experience and not, as on my view, facts. As far as I can tell, he nowhere discusses the factive nature of the world as I’ve stressed it here and what it means for the contents of experience. Of course, I wouldn’t say that “worldly objects” have nothing to do with experience, but my view is that these worldly objects are further embedded in states of the world and that it is them that we have access to in experience—in perception, thought, and in action. As I diagnose the trouble here, Brewer has something similar to what I’ve termed the conceptually structured presentation view of experience (i.e., the view that in experience we grasp objects as having certain properties but then combine them into states of affairs ourselves). As a result, he offloads some of the “conceptual” work that on my view is done by the world of (social and physical) facts onto the experiencing subject. This results in the subject having to do more conceptual work than on my view, which in turn leaves him open to attacks like Hurley’s that he is overintellectualizing the mind. If he is, it isn’t as bad as Hurley thinks it is since his account of concepts is not what she believes it to be. But since I have a different notion of experience, her criticisms miss the target with respect to my view even more than they do Brewer.

One last point about the debate between Hurley and Brewer before we move on. For as much as I side with Brewer, there is a serious disagreement between us that a discussion of the Hurley/Brewer debate makes plain. Hurley suggests that it may be that reason on the ground had I not done so.” The answer “Because of my judgment that there was a pebble there that would have put me on the ground.” would be an odd one, only appropriate when there is in fact some question whether or not said pebble would have caused an accident.

30 2001a, 405.
sons to act are “primary” while reasons to believe are “derivative.” This would appear to be a good result for those interested in the development of conceptual capacities. If non-conceptual reasons to act are widespread in the lower animals, we might very well hold out hope for a story of how conceptual reasons to believe were developed out of them. But why not rather think that both kinds of reasons play necessary roles in the construction of mental content (or more specifically experiential content), and that content arises in the joint operation of the two coordinated by thought? Barring a prior commitment to simple developmental stories, I see no reason to abandon my commitment to content holism maintaining that perception, thought, and action together make up experience and, therefore, the contents of one should be analyzed with reference to the analysis of the others. Hurley’s insistence that perception, action, and consciousness (or experience) are deeply intertwined is right, I think, but, to my thinking, seriously misguided if she thinks that action is the primary notion in the construction of experiential content.

Now, it would be to Brewer’s credit if he were to reject talk of priority altogether in his response to Hurley. The problem is that he doesn’t. He seems to hold—inexplicably, I think—that perception is primary. But if this means what I think it means for Brewer, i.e., that the contents of perception could be characterized independently of any characterizations of actions on the agents part, this is just as wrongheaded as Hurley’s thought.

In this sense, while I disagree with Hurley—in virtue holding of a conceptualist position with respect to the contents of perceptions, actions, and thoughts—I also disagree with Brewer (and agree with Hurley) that the conceptualist thesis should be secured

31 See Brewer 2001b.
by appeal to the contents of perceptual experience on solely epistemological grounds. I, too, would say that Brewer is too doggedly focused on epistemology. I also think, though, that Hurley is too doggedly focused on practical reason. As I see it, we can’t characterize the content of one without a characterization of the content of the other. A wholly theoretical rationality would seem to cut subjects off from the practical, matter-of-fact world, thought about which is empirical. A wholly practical rationality would seem to cut them off from the norms of reasoning as such, norms within which the cognitive agent sees himself as a responsible agent in the first place. It would seem that it takes a foot in both camps to be a rational agent, an agent who has reason for anything (including both belief and action) at all.

5.3 Dreyfus on Nonconceptual Coping

I said in the introduction to this chapter that it was Dreyfus’s possible criticisms that I worry most about. I worry, in particular, about what he would say about my use of “Heideggerian” imagery.\(^{32}\) Recall that §3.5 I criticized the phenomenology of the conceptual presentation view for being unable to accommodate the idea that there is a kind of familiarity with our physical and social embeddedness that breeds not contempt but comfort with the world around us. Why? Because the conceptual presentation view posits that we experience objects and their properties primarily and only then construct states of affairs out of them. This seems not only phenomenologically off key, but, as I argued, the affordances that the world provides us—those things which a phenomenology of coping

\(^{32}\) Dreyfus’s 1991 continues to be an influential guide to, and commentary on, Heidegger’s Being and Time.
in the world shows to be part of the content of experiences, and not just something constructed from—cannot be accommodated on the experience as conceptual presentation view. Now, I suspect that Dreyfus would like and recognize these points, so it’s not with respect to them that I’m worried. It’s rather that I suspect that Dreyfus would find my account off-key with respect to some other set of phenomenological facts.

The best place to find such a criticism would be in his Presidential Address at the Pacific Division of the APA in 2005, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Coping.” There, Dreyfus argues that a phenomenological consideration of the nature of our experience points to a “ground floor of pure perception and receptive coping” that “supports the conceptual upper stories of the edifice of knowledge” but that is itself nonconceptual. McDowell and other conceptualists fail to recognize this ground floor, with the result that their work on the nature of the conceptual upper stories “leave[s] the conceptual component of our lives hanging in midair.” In the (I think) stirring final thought of the talk, Dreyfus calls on philosophers of mind and knowledge to come together to achieve results that may make traditional philosophy obsolete:

The time is ripe to follow McDowell and others in putting aside the outmoded opposition between analytic and continental philosophers and to begin the challenging collaborative task of showing how our conceptual capacities grow out of our nonconceptual ones—how the ground floor of pure perception and receptive coping supports the conceptual upper stories of the edifice of knowledge. Why not work together to understand our

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33 Dreyfus 2005. This was the 2005 Presidential Address at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association. Some of the material in this section was presented to the 2007 Pacific Division meeting of the APA under the title “Dreyfus’s Phenomenological Foundations, A Reply” (Schiller 2007). Dreyfus commented on my paper at that time and the present discussion takes into consideration his responses to me on that occasion.

34 Ibid., 61.

35 Ibid., 47.
grasp of reality from the ground up? Surely, that way we are more likely to succeed than trying to build from the top down.36

I have to admit that I find Dreyfus’s words very convincing. But let’s take a few moments to spell out his arguments and assumptions in detail before we scrap conceptualism and buy into his project.

Dreyfus’s talk begins with a quick biographical sketch of himself as a young philosopher at Harvard. Actually, back in those early days, he tells us, he was a physicist who just happened to wander into C. I. Lewis’ epistemology course.

There, Lewis was confidently expounding the need for an indubitability Given to ground knowledge, and he was explaining where that ground was to be found. I was so impressed that I immediately switched majors from ungrounded physics to grounded philosophy.37

Dreyfus went on to write a dissertation in Lewisian epistemology (“on ostensible objects—the last vestige of the indubitable Given”) even though, as he now puts it, Sellars had by then “denounced the Myth of the Given” and was hard at work “articulating the conceptual structure of our grasp on reality.”38 Dreyfus now recognizes Lewis’s position as “a dead end” and praises McDowell for taking up the Sellarsian project.39

The problem that Dreyfus has with McDowell, however, is his “Sellarsian claim that perception is ‘conceptual all the way out.’”40 This looks to Dreyfus to be problematic for numerous reasons. For one thing it “den[ies] the more basic perceptual capacities we seem to share with prelinguistic infants and higher animals.”41 But for another, and more to the point for the phenomenologically inclined Dreyfus, it “ignore[s] the embodied

38 *Ibid*.
39 *Ibid*.
40 *Ibid*.
41 *Ibid*. 
coping going on on the ground floor; in effect declaring that human experience is upper stories all the way down.” 42 This is a nice image, in a way. It’s so obviously an absurd position—the sheer idea, that any building could be upper stories all the way down!—that if Dreyfus can make it stick against McDowell, or conceptualism at large, he will have at least won the public relations battle between him and his rivals. The question is: Can he?

After his biographical sketch, Dreyfus frames the debate between himself and McDowell in the context of his (Dreyfus’s) well-known criticisms of the conceits of the Strong Artificial Intelligence community of the mid-20th century. 43 In 1968, Marvin Minsky predicted that in 30 years there’d be computers as intelligent as anyone. No more than a decade later, however, Minsky ran into a serious problem, a now well-known problem concerning the representation of commonsense knowledge. It seem that even the most intelligent computers cannot match the commonsense knowledge of a four-year-old child. For example, if a child were told a little story about a birthday party, they would be able to answer commonsense questions about, e.g., what else might have gone on at the party while the “intelligent machine” could not. Such questions might be: “Did Jamie, who brought a birthday present for Sam, bring one for himself?” or “Did Jamie receive a birthday present from Sam?” or “Whose birthday was it?” The answers to these questions should be obvious to my readers (even without hearing the little story, note), and a four-year-old would (I suppose) get them right. But an intelligent machine could only get them right if answers to them had been explicitly fed into the machine. How can this problem

42 Ibid.
43 Dreyfus 1992 is something of a compendium of Dreyfus’s critique of methods in cognitive science, but see also Wrathall and Malpas 2000 for up-to-date discussions of his views.
be solved? Further, what does it say about knowledge and experience that a child can answer such questions while the intelligent machine cannot?

Now, Dreyfus recounts, Minsky did not at first see the seriousness of this problem, though he did not ignore it either. His answer to it was to propose a notion of \textit{frames}. A frame is “a data structure for representing a stereotyped situation, like being in certain kind of living room, or going to a child’s birthday party.”\textsuperscript{44} Frames are supposed to answer the problem inasmuch as they would contain all of the salient features of a situation that one would likely find oneself in. Think of them as a vast database within a database where all the information about things such as birthday parties are stored. E.g.,

\textbf{BIRTHDAY PARTIES}

(a) Only the person in whose honor the party is thrown receives presents.
(b) All guests should bring presents to a birthday party unless otherwise instructed not to.
(c) The person whose birthday it is is identical to the one in whose honor the party is thrown.

\ldots

The idea is that when an intelligent machine was taken to a birthday party (or simply asked questions about birthday parties) it would call up that particular frame (the \textbf{BIRTHDAY PARTIES} frame) and use it to respond (hopefully) as intelligently as a four-year-old would in that situation. The intelligent machine, for example, would have brought a present to the party, know that the presents are not for him, and know that if the party were being thrown for Bob it’s because it is Bob’s birthday. Not bad for a machine.

Unfortunately, this didn’t work either. For one thing, one can always think up another question to ask the four-year-old about going to a birthday party that the program-

\textsuperscript{44} Minsky 1975, 212. Quoted in Dreyfus 1992, 35.
mers of the intelligent machine had not thought to include in the frame. Perhaps there would be small presents—favors—for all the guests, and so some of the presents would belong to the robot and he should take them. Because of such open-endedness, there is a practical problem of being able to include all of the relevant information into a frame. For another, even if one were to put in all of the information relevant to a given situation, how does the intelligent machine determine which frame to apply to which situation? Does it have yet other frames which tell it which frames would be appropriate to which situations and when? An infinite regress of frames looms. Frames promised Minsky a solution, but in the end he found himself saddled with the so-called “frame problem.”

Dreyfus spent much of early career applying the insights of existential phenomenology to shed light on the seriousness—and, in his eyes, the hopelessness—of the frame problem. He showed that we should not be trying to solve the frame problem, but rather should be concerned to abandon the cognitivist perspective wherein man is conceived as thinking machine first and foremost. We should ditch the notion of frames in favor of a notion of embeddedness in the world.

Only if we stand back from our engaged situation in the world and represent things from a detached theoretical perspective do we confront the frame problem. That is, if you strip away relevance and start with context-free facts, you can’t get relevance back. Happily, however, we are, as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it, always already in a world that is organized in terms of our bodies and interests and thus permeated by relevance.47

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45 For a detailed, critical discussion of Minsky and the frame problem, see pages 27–66 of (Dreyfus 1992).
46 Existential phenomenology is the attempt to do ontology on the basis of phenomenological facts. Merleau-Ponty and Todes fall into this class as well.
47 Dreyfus 2005, 49.
I think it’s fair to say that Dreyfus has spent much of his career making sense of this phenomenological insight. And he was right to use it against cognitivism in its many forms.

But it seems that he is not quite convinced that philosophy has taken this insight to heart. For it is inasmuch as they run afoul of it that Dreyfus feels obliged to talk about how even seemingly sympathetic contemporary philosophers like McDowell can benefit from the phenomenological insights of existential phenomenology.

If this is right, the question is, How is it that conceptualists run afoul of the phenomenological insights Dreyfus is focusing on here? As I will argue, I don’t think that they do, or at least I don’t think they have to if they have the right notions of the conceptual and of what it is to be embedded both physically and socially in the world. That said, let’s examine the phenomenological evidence that Dreyfus marshals against conceptualism as he understands it, i.e. through the eyes of McDowell.

As Dreyfus sees it, the heart of the phenomenological debate between him and McDowell concerns the latter’s use of a notion central to Aristotelian ethics, that of “second nature,” “practical wisdom” or, as in the Greek, “phronesis.” In some of the most important sections of McDowell’s 1994, McDowell considers the question of how it could be that free exercises of what he calls, after Kant, spontaneity (the capacities used in understanding the world) could be natural.48 His answer is that our engagement with the world qua rational animals is normative in the sense that we experience the world in precisely normative terms because of an upbringing into a world where the normative matters. We are taught to see certain things as right or wrong before it is ever rationally

48 McDowell’s discussion of Aristotelian ethics in (1994) starts at Lecture 4, §7, but his interest in it goes back before this discussion. See the essays collected in Part 1 of McDowell’s (1998c).
explained to us *why* those things are right or wrong. On Aristotle’s account, a truly good person is one who has had the proper *upbringing* so that they needn’t deliberate about what to do when they see that such and such is the case in some normative situation. They simply *see* what the right thing to do is and *do it*, posthaste. McDowell’s thought is that our upbringing into a normative world is as natural as one could wish for, as natural as a sheep’s cautious upbringing into a world of hungry wolves. Anyone who claims otherwise (who sees a problem with normativity) is holding to an indefensible ideological commitment to the material as solely natural.

Dreyfus appreciates this focus on practical wisdom in McDowell. He does not, however, like the McDowellian view that practical wisdom is (or even *could be*) conceptual. As he sees it, “a phenomenological reading suggests that Aristotle’s account of *phronesis* is actually a counterexample to McDowell’s conceptualism.”

If we set aside the interpretative question (i.e., whether or not Heidegger saw practical wisdom as conceptual), this question is to be resolved on the phenomenological evidence. Here is the evidence:

> most of our ethical life consists in simply *seeing* the appropriate thing to do and responding without deliberation, as when we help a blind person cross the street or when, after years of experience, we unreflectively balance, case by case, the demands of our professional and personal lives.

These examples should sound familiar; the Aristotelian points are put in terms of seeing what is right and doing it. But these are meant to be *phenomenological claims* for Dreyfus. In what sense? In the sense that they are supposed to say something about what it’s like to be ethical, what the experience of an ethical person is.

49 Dreyfus 2005, 51.
And it is, I think, not a bad description, especially seeing as how nicely it meshes with the facts view of experience to say as much. There are moral facts of the matter, and for Aristotle the ethical person sees and responds to them without the intervention of some guiding ethical precept. If it is indeed a fact that helping a blind person across the street would be the right thing to do, then it follows that on my view where facts themselves (both brute and social) can be directly perceived, such a fact could be seen.

If this point can seemingly accommodated on my conceptualist account, and McDowell is also a conceptualist, then why does Dreyfus see them as causing McDowell so much trouble? Because (1) Dreyfus understands McDowell’s conceptualism as entailing that “ethical expertise can be conceptually articulated” and (2) because practical wisdom is understood as involving situations where one is responsive to specific situations that cannot be captured in “general concepts.”\(^5\) Let me take these points in turn.

There is a serious question here as to what it means for something to be “conceptually articulated.” Dreyfus isn’t quite clear on this point. So we have to extrapolate his view of conceptual articulation by working backward from his attack on McDowell. As Dreyfus notes, McDowell sometimes talks about the “reconstruction” of a reason for acting. This looks to fit nicely with the Davidsonian idea that we leaned on earlier, that the difference between actions and events is that actions have reasons behind them, that they are caused in the right way by the reasons of the acting subject.\(^6\) Dreyfus believes that because there are cases where it seems as if these reasons cannot be captured after

\(^6\) §4.6
the fact, it makes sense to say that some actions are caused independently of any reason at all. And then we say: no reasons, no concepts.

Dreyfus brings to bear both phenomenological evidence and the results of some interesting studies to make his case here. As has by now become his modus operandi, Dreyfus asks us to consider the experience of the expert. While it may be true, Dreyfus admits, that beginners refer to rules when learning a new skill, experts no longer seem to. Or, and this is the key point, they very often can’t articulate any rules that they are following, and may even be seen as not using any rules at all when expertly engaged in some activity. For example, skilled cyclists can’t tell us exactly which rule they used to expertly avoid hitting a pebble which would have caused them to go down; skilled fighter pilots have been known to teach cadets one set of rules for telling bogies from friendlies in the skies but then not use those rules themselves; Grandmaster chess players can play speed chess (or “lightning chess”) at the Master level, even though there is no way they could be processing all the rules for a successful strategy that they might otherwise employ in the course of a regulation match. Dreyfus calls these examples of either—depending on whether or not we are talking about perception or action—“pure perception” or “receptive coping.” The Grandmaster playing speed chess, we are to believe, uses “pure perception” to simply see the right move and then “copes receptively” with the situation by moving without thinking about it. This wouldn’t mean much if she didn’t then actually do well, of course, but in fact she still plays Master level chess. Somehow or other she accomplishes something that looks theoretical without thinking at all.
Now, there is something right in this, and we’ll say what it is in a minute. But let’s say more about (2). In pure perception and receptive coping, we are tuned to the specific situation. So well-tuned, in fact, that we could not if pressed accurately say why or what we did without some “retroactive rationalizing.” But then we can ask, why does this show pure perception and receptive coping to be nonconceptual after all?

After all that we’ve said so far in this discussion about what concepts are, Dreyfus’s answer might not inspire much confidence. He seems to think that what characterizes the conceptual is “the general” as against “the specific,” or even “according to rules” as against “independently of the rules.” This may or may not be a good criticism of McDowell’s view of the conceptual (though I don’t think so), but it surely isn’t a good criticism of my view. Following McDowell, I have said that the space of reasons just is the space of concepts. And so, for me, whether or not perceiving or acting is conceptual is determined by whether or not it can be made intelligible without reference to the space of reasons. Dreyfus seems to think that what characterizes the conceptual is its necessary generality as against the specificity of the nonconceptual, but I think we can read him more charitably here. Though he does not explicitly state his commitment to an identity between the space of reasons and the space of concepts, he does attempt to defend the idea that pure perception and receptive coping are outside the space of reasons in an attempt to avoid the conceptualist thesis. He says,

For Heidegger, the phronimos’s actions are not in the space of reasons at all. As Heidegger sums it up, ‘In [phronesis] there is accomplished something like pure perceiving, one that no longer falls within the domain of logos.’

53 Ibid., 51. The Heidegger quote is from his 1992, p. 112.
And again:

…masterful action does not seem to require or even to allow placement in the space of reasons.54

The reasons Dreyfus thinks that this is the case we have already seen. They have to do with the expert’s inability to articulate any reasons for their acting as they do, or sometimes with the speed of the skillful coping itself which seems to rule out any cognitive activity that could be counted conceptual.

If these points are right, even though he uses the experiences of the expert to make his point, Dreyfus wants to expand them to all persons. This is because even though you and I are not (perhaps) expert cyclists, Grandmaster chess players, or skilled fighter pilots, we are experts at coping with our world. This is true, Dreyfus wants to say, of the social world where we expertly converse with our friends and colleagues, but also of the brute world where we do things like sink into our couches after a long day at the office “without thinking about it.” We are experts at responding to the affordances of the world:

responding to affordances does not require noticing them. Indeed, to best respond to affordances (whether animal or social, prelinguistic or linguistic) one must not notice them as affordances, but rather, as Heidegger says, they “withdraw” and we simply “press into” them.55

Thoughts such as these are supposed to be decisive, for they are the result of sensitive phenomenological analysis. As Dreyfus sees it, anyone who denies them thus denies a role for pure perception and receptive coping (nonconceptual as they are) and are guilty of falling into what he calls “the Myth of the Mental.”

54 Ibid., 58.
55 Ibid., 56.
Though there is more that could be said about Dreyfus’s 2005, I think we’ve said enough to accurately characterize his attack on McDowell and conceptualism. So let me now offer a few responses that I think suffice to answer his criticisms.

(1) *The phenomenology of “expert” experiences is not as clear as Dreyfus would have us believe.*

Consider the following alternate descriptions of expert activities:

- cycling at dusk I exercise judgment in adjusting my course as various obstacles appear in the light of my headlamp. I walk down the aisles of the library stacks looking for a call number, eyes flitting from book to book, deciding in each case whether to stop, to continue, or to back up. Playing speed chess I make my move without allowing myself time to think through its consequences. In each of these cases I make judgments—I reach a conclusion that it is in some sense responsive to evidence—even though I don’t undertake any conscious deliberation and I experience my judgment as issuing more-or-less instantaneously.\(^{56}\)

These phenomenological descriptions, though they concern the phenomenology of “judgment,” are inconsistent with the phenomenological facts as Dreyfus sees them. This is because they very explicitly describe the experience of the expert as in a sense disengaged from the specifics of the situation, but to the precise and practiced degree that the expert can trust that their experience will take over for them. Let me explain.

Consider the speed chess example in the quote above. Wayne Martin (whose phenomenological descriptions we are considering here) holds that when he plays speed chess he makes his move without “allowing” himself time to think through the consequences. This isn’t quite the same thing as just “seeing the right move” that Dreyfus claims for the expert. One way to fill out this description is to say that it isn’t that the expert chess player sees the right move, but rather that he trusts that all the time he has

\(^{56}\) Martin 2006, 2.
spent playing the game will help him to make moves that will not be so bad. Perhaps he can even think for a second or two about what move he has made (about its consequences) while his opponent makes his lighting fast move. If this is a good characterization of an expert playing speed chess, and if similar descriptions work for the other examples, then we seem to have lost the motivation for thinking that there is nonconceptual “pure perception” or “receptive coping.”

Martin’s description also points, I think, to what I’ve been calling “generic experience.” The expert chess player, we might think, might be described as seeing such things as that the attack is coming from the right and so he reacts to it by strengthening his right flank. This level of description would seem to suffice to explain why the grandmaster did what he did per specific pieces and moves, yet avoids attributing to him the operation of cognitive tasks that must be seen as too complex for him in such a short amount of time (i.e., seeing what would happen to every single piece if he were to make a certain move or not make another move, etc.). That is, the expert chess player will of course intend to move specific pieces to specific positions, but the “in-order-to” in which the intention must be understood will be characterized by reference to generic strengthening the right flank but not by reference to whatever that move implies 20 moves down line the line.58

That there is this level of description available to us in characterizing the contents of our experiences makes the conceptualist thesis much more plausible. But it can be hard to accept, particularly when we reflect on how well an “expert coper” (to use Dreyfus’s

57 See §2.4.
58 … as Grandmasters are often described as playing, e.g., when we say that they think 20 moves into the future.
term) can handle the world around him. We might look back at the chess match, when all is said and done, and ask the Grandmaster: “How did you know that by moving your queen to kings rook 4 you would slip out of your opponents trap?” It might turn out that some Grandmasters would try and rationalize it, claiming for themselves all sorts of insight. But it’s just as likely, and much more plausible phenomenologically, that slipping out of the trap wasn’t his intention in moving at all, or at least not to the degree of specificity that the question assumes. Perhaps he was simply trying to build up that side of the board and the particular action we are asking about was a part of that. In a sense, then, his slipping out of that trap was a consequence of his action, but not strictly an action of his (if this distinction can be made to hold). By not allowing for the possibility of generic experiences, Dreyfus illicitly forces the conceptualist in the position of the Grandmaster who refuses to admit that he didn’t have the game under complete control. Just as the honest Grandmaster should be able to admit that he was working on a more generic level of play and decision making (making the move without allowing himself to think through its consequences), so should the honest reporter of one’s experience. If a reporter of a generic experience characterizes the content of their experience as such, the phenomenologist should trust that assessment and not be dazzled by the much more specific descriptions of the action or perception available to one from a third-person perspective.

(2) Dreyfus in fact seems to allow for just the kind of rationality that would secure the McDowellian thesis of the identity of the space of reasons and the space of concepts.

59 This seems to me a perfectly normal thing to assert, and reflects a quite common way of thinking of ourselves. There are some things that I do not set out to do (because I did not think of them, e.g.) but that result from what I took myself to be doing. Perhaps I prevented a murder from honking my horn at a slow driver in front of me. I should not thus be described as having acted to prevent a murder.
At one point, Dreyfus looks to concede all that I think the conceptualist should want if he were to hold an identity between the space of reasons and the space of concepts. He says,

In the special case of games, then, we can profit from McDowell’s suggestion that we think of such rules as having become second nature. But we should bear in mind that, when they function as second nature, they do not function as rules we consciously or unconsciously follow but as a landscape on the basis of which skilled coping and reasoning takes place. Only in this sense can the rules of the game be said to guide thought and action.  

Dreyfus is here talking about “the special case of games” and of “rules” to guide action. And he claims that it may sometimes make sense to say that these rules are second nature not inasmuch as they are consciously or even unconsciously followed, but inasmuch as they form “the landscape on the basis of which skilled coping and reasoning takes place.”

What puzzles me—yet also gives me hope for a reconciliation with Dreyfus—is why Dreyfus should not see this as simply conceding the debate to the conceptualists. True, Dreyfus is here talking about “the special case of games.” But according to the Sellarsian tradition, being privy to the space of reasons just means to be a player in the game “justifying and being able to justify what one says.”  

Sellars, of course, is following the Wittgensteinian tradition of talking in terms of “language games.” But neither Wittgenstein nor Sellars means for their analysis to be limited to games as such. Their point in talking about games is to make clear the connection between norms as limits and the ways in which such limits work to give significance to events.

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60 2005, 53.

61 Sellars 1956, §36.

62 Wittgenstein 1953.
Dreyfus seems preoccupied with the status of rules in our understanding of action in particular. And he clearly wants to argue that the expert neither follows nor even knows the rules that would explain his actions rationally. As he puts it,

if we understand concepts as context-free principles or rules that could be used to guide actions or at least make them intelligible, a phenomenology of expert coping shows concepts to be absent or even to get in the way of a masterful response to [a] specific situation.\(^6^3\)

If we accept this identity, then to the extent that we were able to show that expert actions were done independently from rules, they would also be done independently of concepts. Whether or not McDowell would agree to this characterization (and I don’t think he would), I would not want to. My notion of the conceptual is more broad than “context-free principles or rules.” For me, as I think it is for Sellars and those that follow him, the conceptual is, just as Dreyfus says, “a landscape on the basis of which skilled coping and reasoning can take place.” The conceptual is embodied, we might say, in the social world of facts that acts as limits of and possibilities for experience. It is perhaps on this point that Dreyfus and I could come together, finding that there is something conceptual about expert behavior after all.

(3) Dreyfus refuses to see conceptualism as anything other than an epistemologically driven thesis.

As we saw in talking about Hurley’s criticisms above, there is a common perception that conceptualism is a purely epistemological thesis. The result of such a perception is the idea that conceptualists need to be more open-minded, to take more than just epistemological questions into account in their theories of experiential content. For as much

\(^{63}\) Dreyfus 2005, 58.
as Dreyfus claims to appreciate what McDowell is doing, I find it odd that he does not recognize the extent to which McDowell’s project is a phenomenological one and, as a result, repeats what I think is a false and damaging perception of the conceptualist position. I hope that my efforts in this essay, my very explicit attempt to treat issues in the philosophy of mind, epistemology, and phenomenology together, will go some way toward turning this misconception around.

One might try and defend Dreyfus here by claiming that McDowell’s phenomenological efforts are somehow not quite worthy of the label “phenomenology.” Dreyfus seems to say as much, for as he sees it, even though McDowell appears to echo the phenomenological strains of the existential phenomenologists in talking about the “embodiment” of the human subject, and “seems to be channeling Heidegger when he speaks of ‘our unproblematic openness to the world’ and how ‘we find always already engaged with the world,’” McDowell cannot be fundamentally getting at the same thing phenomenologically. Why not? There seems to be no other reason than because McDowell chooses to think of these things as conceptual activities! That is, Dreyfus wants to argue that McDowell’s conceptualism is misguided, and he does so by showing that the phenomenology can be understood as showing as much. My claim is that the phenomenology of experience points in the other direction precisely to the extent that we can make sense of our embeddedness in a world of social and brute facts.

Now, McDowell is trying to characterize the contents of experience by examining how Kantian receptivity and understanding structure experience and account for its con-

64 It is on his point (embodiment) that Dreyfus thinks we should go beyond Merleau-Ponty and look to Samuel Todes.

65 Dreyfus 2005, p. 50.
tents. Though Dreyfus does not seem to recognize this as phenomenology, on at least one phenomenologist’s account this is just what phenomenology is. Wayne Martin characterizes phenomenology as “the study of the structure of experience, particularly of the ways in which things (entities, objects) manifest themselves in experience.” If McDowell were to accept this characterization, then his studies just would be phenomenology. As I see it, Dreyfus has no good reason to deny to McDowell the label “phenomenologist,” whatever dialectical advantage it’s worth.

(4) **Dreyfus holds to a kind of phenomenological foundationalism that should be rejected.**

Speaking of dialectical advantages, it is here that I think the critical commentary on Dreyfus’s thought could cut the deepest. Despite the fact that he recognizes, with Searls, how misguided was C. I. Lewis’ foundationalist epistemology, he seems to (implicitly or explicitly) hold to a foundationalism of another sort. Though there are many examples of such talk in Dreyfus 2005, consider again the final thought of Dreyfus’s Presidential Address.

The time is ripe to follow McDowell and others in putting aside the outmoded opposition between analytic and continental philosophers and to begin the challenging collaborative task of showing how our conceptual capacities grow out of our nonconceptual ones—how the ground floor of pure perception and receptive coping supports the conceptual upper stories of the edifice of knowledge. Why not work together to understand our

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66 Martin 2006, 4. It’s worth pointing out that Martin notes right after this by “things” he means not just object but “actions, events, relations, persons, numbers, ideals, mistakes, character defects, desires, fears” and more. I take it, then, that his characterization is broad enough to include what I have called “facts” and thus that his characterization of phenomenology would be available to me. Actions, events, relations, persons, etc. are perhaps not facts. But my view is not that facts are the only contents of experience, but that all the contents of experience are to be characterized in reference to the facts. A fear is not a fact, but fears concerns facts inasmuch as they are of the obtaining of a particular state of affairs such as getting stung by a spider or finding that one needs a root canal.
grasp of reality from the ground up? Surely, that way we are more likely to succeed than trying to build from the top down.\textsuperscript{67}

On one reading of this, Dreyfus’s foundationalism stems from the commonsense and highly plausible view that our capacities \textit{qua} human subject to “cope” in the world are no different in kind than capacities of animals and infants to do the same. If so, then it seems natural to expect that we should be able to give an account of the structure and contents of our experience in terms that are based in the structures and contents of the experiences of animals and infants.

On the other hand, it’s not at all clear that this is the best approach to understanding human experience. Certainly it’s not an unquestioned assumption (if such a thing were to exist in philosophy in the first place). Brandom, e.g., very explicitly starts his account of the construction of conceptual contents by focusing on the phenomenon of \textit{sapi-ence} as against \textit{sentience}.\textsuperscript{68} And I have followed his example.\textsuperscript{69} What justifies such an approach? It’s precisely a commitment to the essential role that the space of reasons plays in structuring our experience and determining the empirical content of what we say, perceive, think, and do. Brandom’s is a “top-down” approach to content in the sense that only in the context of the exchange of reasons can the more primitive parts of us be understood as something which has been fundamentally changed in its taking up in experience.

\textsuperscript{67} Dreyfus 2005. p. 61.
\textsuperscript{68} See the opening pages of Brandom’s 1994.
\textsuperscript{69} See §1.9 above.
Perhaps surprisingly, there might even be grounds for Dreyfus to accept a top-down approach. Dreyfus concludes his discussion of Minsky’s frame problem by noting that there are

models of how the embodied brain could provide a causal basis for the intentional arc without doing any symbolic information processing and without instantiating a causal chain from input to response.

He says, and I quote in full,

For example, Walter Freeman, a founding figure in neuroscience and the first to take seriously the idea of the brain as a nonlinear dynamical system, has worked out an account of how the brain of an active animal can, in effect, categorize inputs significant to the organism by forming an attractor landscape. Freeman’s model exhibits a kind of top-down governing causality. As the organism responds to what is significant to it, the overall pattern of attractor activity “enslaves” the activity of the individual neurons the way a storm enslaves the individual raindrops. Freeman considers the philosophy underlying his work close to Merleau-Ponty’s, and, indeed, Merleau-Ponty seems to anticipate an attractor account when he says:

It is necessary only to accept the fact that the physico-chemical actions of which the organism is in a certain manner composed, instead of unfolding in parallel and independent sequences, are constituted … in relatively stable “vortices.”

I can’t speak to how well Freeman’s account makes sense of “how the brain makes up its mind.” But I actually really like this picture. As I would tell it, however, the “relatively stable vortices” are best characterized as the high-level empirically contentful states of experience. Our empirical experiences, necessarily characterized in terms that make reference to the space of reasons, act (on Freeman’s analogy) as the storm. It is they that direct and determine the contents of the contentful lower-level mental states. For example, to use the example of the cyclist making a turn from Chapter 4, we can say that it is in the

70 Freeman 2001.
71 Dreyfus 2005, 49–50; Merleau-Ponty 1945, 153.
context of the rational aim to *stay on the road* that the cyclist’s actions can be characterized.

Some theorists will want to rather insist that it is the fine details of the event itself that should characterize the content of the action. They will say that because our cyclist expertly took the turn at *such and such a speed* and at *such and such an angle* (etc.) that the content of the action itself needs to be characterized in terms of them. But why should we accept this bottom-up approach when, as the nonconceptualist counts on, subjects cannot characterize their actions in anything like the fine detail that this picture suggests? (The same point goes for the contents of perceptions, thus making moot the points about the “fineness of grain” of perceptual experience.) As I see it, the top-down approach that Dreyfus seems here to not only find interesting but to actually *endorse* inasmuch as he finds Merleau-Ponty expressing it seems to support a conceptualism, such as mine, that recognizes the phenomenological viability of generic experience.

Indeed, it seems to me quite natural to say that the practical wisdom of the agent could act to determine the highest level of content specification for the subject. This would be a way of recognizing the importance what Dreyfus calls “the space of motivations.” The world has the affordances for us that it does *because* we have the practical interests that we do. When we are tired, big, fluffy couches afford for us resting, whereas when we are energetic they afford for us (say) jumping on. We perceive them situationally, with certain aspects being *good for us now* and others not, because we have these socially articulable interests. Indeed, in line with what I have already argued, a sound phenomenology of perception characterizes it as a grasping the facticity of the world. Some of these facts are social (i.e., they are not all brute). With Freeman’s Merleau-
Pontian in mind, we can say that it is because we have the interests that we do that we can grasp the (social and brute) facticity of the world. We see chairs as chairs because we sometimes have an interest to sit in them. And we have interests to sit in chairs because of the existence of a world of brute and socials facts that we both create and find before us qua natural rational beings.

There is much I want to agree with in Dreyfus’s thought, then. By embracing an ontology of facts, as well as recognizing the existence of social facts and by not reducing them to brute facts, I reject the Aristotelian ontology that Heidegger railed against in Sein und Zeit. I hold with Heidegger and Dreyfus that Zuhandcnheit and Existenz (the way of being of socially-laden equipment like Hammers and Coke bottles, on the one hand, and the way of being of persons, on the other) are as ontologically basic as the way of being of any substance (Vorhandenheit, or the “presence-at-hand” in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation). We are in agreement, then, about many important ontological matters.

Where we disagree is the idea that this implies the death of intentionalist accounts of experiential content. Dreyfus thinks this as a reaffirmation of an Aristotelian substance ontology, and he sees McDowell as misunderstanding it in his attempt to treat the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom naturally, as if the mind where the substance and mental states with their contents were its properties. But this does not follow. One does not have to hold that minds are independently existing, atomistic substances to be able to say that experiences have content. As I have argued with my emphasis on the importance, and irreducibility, of social facts, mind and world are inextricably combined from the perspective of what’s experienced. As long as it makes sense to say that persons have ex-
periences, and that experiences are *of* something, there will be a need for an account of the content of experience.

5.4 Conclusion

There’s much more I could say in response to both Hurley and Dreyfus, and many more criticisms that I could raise for myself. I’ve addressed these two thinkers in particular, however, because they are close in spirit to the view advanced here, yet veer off in the wrong direction in arguing against conceptualism as such, not because in answering them I can be said to have successfully argued my position once and for all. Their challenges warn us that if we are to adopt a conceptualist position, we must be careful about how the conceptual must be understood. The conceptual is not to be conceived as only that which stands behind a detached rational stance. The conceptual does not live or die with rationality alone. The conceptual can be (is) embedded in a messy world. The conceptual needn’t be precise, either, but can be generic. In our taking up of affordances, in our acting on the big picture and without intention toward the fine details, in our seeing what interests us and ignoring what doesn’t.

Conceptualism is often characterized as the view that “experience is conceptual through and through.” This is how McDowell puts it,\(^72\) and many have been happy to think of this as the slogan of the conceptualist. In this sense, if this is what conceptualism is, I too am defending the idea that experience is conceptual through and through. But there is another sense in which my conceptualism does not amount to this claim. It is the world of our experiences, in the way in which we experience it, that is conceptual. And

\(^{72}\) E.g., 1994/1996, 46.
our experience is conceptual inasmuch as it is embedded in that world. Experience is conceptual through and through because every experience is shaped by the conceits of reason, by way of the world.


