

# Nonconceptual Content in Perception

By Loren Bremmers

5687691

Master's Thesis submitted for the

RMA Philosophy

Utrecht University

June 21, 2019

Supervisor: Dr. Menno Liefers

Second reader: Prof. dr. Stefan van der Stigchel

Third reader: Prof. dr. Teun Tieleman



**Utrecht University**

## **Abstract**

Since the publication of Gareth Evans's *The Varieties of Reference* in 1982, in which Evans introduced the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content, there has been an ongoing debate in the philosophy of perception about the nature of the content of perceptual experiences. At first sight, the debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists does not seem that difficult to get a grip on, as most proponents or opponents of nonconceptual content use versions of the same arguments to argue for and against one of the two positions. However, this thesis shows that there is a complication: methodological disagreements between conceptualists and nonconceptualists cause the participants in the debate to talk past one another. In response to this complication, this thesis argues that (1) philosophical accounts of perception must meet two conditions if a more constructive debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists is to be realized, and that (2) given my conditions for philosophical accounts of perception, perceptual content can best be understood as nonconceptual.

**Keywords:** Conceptualism, John McDowell, Nonconceptual content, Nonconceptualism, Perceptual content, Perceptual experience, Philosophy of perception

## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Context .....	4
Aim and Relevance .....	5
Structure .....	6
1. An Overview of The Debate on Nonconceptual Content .....	8
1.1 Nonconceptualism.....	8
1.1.1 What is Nonconceptual Content? .....	8
1.1.2 The Nonconceptualist Position.....	9
1.1.3 The Motivations for Nonconceptualism .....	10
1.1.4 The Challenges for Nonconceptualism.....	11
1.2 Conceptualism .....	13
1.2.1 The Conceptualist Position .....	13
1.2.2 The Motivations for Conceptualism .....	13
1.2.3 The Challenges for Conceptualism.....	15
1.3 The State View and Content View .....	17
1.4 Summary.....	18
2. Two Conditions for Accounts of Perception .....	19
2.1 Methodological Approaches to the Debate on Nonconceptual Content .....	19
2.1.1 The Varied Nature of Motivations in the Debate .....	19
2.1.2 Empirical Approach of Nonconceptualists and the Armchair Approach of Conceptualists .....	20
2.1.3 Why Realizing a Constructive Debate is Difficult .....	22
2.2 Proposal for Two Conditions .....	23
2.2.1 Compatibility with the Empirical Sciences .....	23
2.2.2 Story of the Features of the Relationship between Concepts and Perceptual Experiences .....	24
2.3 Summary.....	25
3. The Shortcomings of Conceptualism .....	27
3.1 Conceptualism and Empirical Science .....	27
3.1.1 The Distinction between Human and Animal/Infant Perception.....	27
3.1.2 Nonveridical Perceptions .....	35
3.2 Conceptualism on Features of the Relationship between Concepts and Perceptual Experiences .....	43
3.3 Summary.....	45

4. A Defense of Nonconceptualism .....	46
4.1 Nonconceptualism and Empirical Science .....	46
4.2 Nonconceptualism on Features of the Relationship between Concepts and Perceptual Experiences .....	50
4.2.1 The Difference between Perceptions and Beliefs .....	51
4.2.2 Grounding Perceptual Beliefs and Judgements .....	55
4.3 Summary.....	59
Conclusion.....	60
Bibliography .....	63

## Introduction

Since the publication of Gareth Evans's *The Varieties of Reference* in 1982, in which Evans introduced the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content, there has been an ongoing debate in the philosophy of perception about the nature of the content of perceptual experiences. Central to the debate is the question of whether the concepts one possesses limit one's experiences. As an illustration of what this question entails, consider the following case. A birdwatcher and I are both looking at the same bird. I have no knowledge of birds and have no idea what kind of bird it is I am looking at. The birdwatcher, on the other hand, immediately knows that the bird he sees is a hummingbird. According to some philosophers, one can only see something as an *F* if one has the concept *F*. So, whereas the birdwatcher, who possesses the concept 'hummingbird' sees the hummingbird, I, who lack the concept 'hummingbird', do not. I merely see a bird (assuming that I do possess that concept). Still, the experience of the birdwatcher and my own experience seem to have something in common. Our experiences do not seem to represent the world in an entirely different way: we both see a small, metallic green colored bird. Moreover, on the basis of experiences such as these, I can acquire the concept 'hummingbird' and learn to recognize the bird I see as a hummingbird. But how do we account for the similarities between the two experiences? There are two responses. Some, who agree with the assumption that one can only see something as *F* if one has the concept *F*, argue that the birdwatcher and I share (observational) concepts such as 'small', 'metallic green' and 'bird' that figure in our experience. Although our experiences are different, these shared concepts explain the similarities between them. Others, who (partly) disagree with the assumption that concepts limit experiences in this way, argue that the birdwatcher's experience and my own experience are similar because they share a kind of content that is nonconceptual.<sup>1</sup> Debate continues on which response is right.

## Context

This thesis responds to the ongoing debate on nonconceptual content within the philosophy of perception. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception*, Wayne Wright claims that the participants in the debate agree that perceptual states have content and that this content is representational.<sup>2</sup> What does this mean? *Perception* is the use of our sense organs to perceive the world.<sup>3</sup> To say that a perceptual state has *content* is to say that there is a way in which an object, property or state of affairs in the world is conveyed to a subject by her perceptual experience.<sup>4</sup> This content is

---

<sup>1</sup> Tim Crane, "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience," in *The Contents of Experience: Essays on Perception*, ed. Tim Crane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 136-137.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Wright, "Nonconceptual Content," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception*, ed. Mohan Matthen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, July 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600472.013.003> (accessed on 14-03-2019).

<sup>3</sup> William Fish, *Philosophy of Perception: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Cussins, "Content, Conceptual Content, and Nonconceptual Content," in *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, ed. York H. Gunther (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 133; Susanna Siegel, "The Contents of

representational if the “content [...] is evaluable as correct or as incorrect.”<sup>5</sup> Perceptual content can then be said to have a correctness condition under which it represents the environment or world correctly.<sup>6</sup> Participants in the debate disagree about whether perceptual content is, similar to belief content, conceptual in nature. Content is *conceptual* if a subject needs to master the concepts required for a theorist to specify (the correctness conditions for) the content, content is *nonconceptual* if such mastery is unrequired.<sup>7</sup> Throughout this thesis, I call the position of those who hold that perceptual experience only has conceptual content *conceptualism*, and the position of those who hold that perceptual experience has a nonconceptual content *nonconceptualism*.<sup>8</sup>

When I discuss conceptualism, I have John McDowell's view on perception as proposed in his book *Mind and World* in mind. McDowell is perhaps the most outspoken critic of nonconceptualism, and other defenders of the view are inspired by his works. I do not have a particular philosopher's view in mind when I write about nonconceptualism. The motivations for and challenges of nonconceptualism that I discuss in this thesis apply to any particular view on which beliefs and perceptions have different kinds of content. Likewise, although McDowell directs his arguments against Evans's view in particular, his objections affect any nonconceptualist view. Because the arguments for and against nonconceptualism apply at this high level of generality, I do not consider it necessary to focus on a particular nonconceptualist theorist's view for the purposes of this thesis.<sup>9</sup>

## Aim and Relevance

At first sight, the debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists does not seem that difficult to get a grip on. Most proponents or opponents of nonconceptual perceptual content use versions of the same arguments to argue for and against one of the two positions, which makes it seemingly quite an easy task to get an overview of the debate. However, there is an important complication. Conceptualists and nonconceptualists are driven by very different motivations. Whereas nonconceptualists are often motivated by empirical findings or focus on features of the relationship between perceptual experiences and concepts (in contrast to features of the relationship between beliefs and concepts), conceptualists usually focus on epistemological considerations. As a result, as Wright notices in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception*, “researchers are sometimes talking past one another or misjudging the resources available to their opponents” in the debate on nonconceptual content.<sup>10</sup>

---

Perception,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/perception-contents/> (accessed on 12-03-2019).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Peacocke, “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 5 (2001): 240.

<sup>6</sup> Crane, “The Nonconceptual Content of Experience,” 139.

<sup>7</sup> José Luis Bermúdez, “What Is at Stake in the Debate on Nonconceptual Content?,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 21 (2007): 55-56, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Peacocke, “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?,” 244.

<sup>9</sup> *Comment*: Richard G. Heck makes a similar claim in “Nonconceptual Content and the ‘Space of Reasons’,” *Philosophical Review* 109, no. 4 (2000): 488.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, “Nonconceptual Content.”

In my thesis, I want to argue for nonconceptualism while simultaneously responding to the abovementioned complication. The purpose of this thesis is therefore twofold. First, I analyze why the participants in the debate on nonconceptual content are often talking past each other and I propose two conditions for philosophical accounts of perception, which I believe make a more constructive debate and a fair examination of the positions possible. Second, I argue that, given my conditions for accounts which examine the nature of perceptual content, perceptual content can best be understood as nonconceptual.

The question of whether perceptual content is nonconceptual is of interest for two reasons. First, if empirical findings point towards the existence of nonconceptual perceptual content, this raises a challenge for philosophers who argue that there are a priori reasons to maintain that perceptual content is conceptual. Second, the answer to the question has interesting epistemological implications. If we have reason to believe that there is nonconceptual perceptual content, we need a story of how perceptual contents can ground perceptual beliefs and judgements whilst lacking the kind of content beliefs and judgements have. By thinking and writing about what such a story should look like, I hope to contribute to the epistemological debate that has taken place throughout the history of philosophy, in which many philosophers have wondered whether and how we can acquire knowledge about the external world. Moreover, I believe the secondary literature on the debate on nonconceptual content has not always succeeded in providing a clear overview of the positions in the debate and the nuances and complexities that complicate it. By providing such a clear overview, and by analyzing the reason why philosophers from the different sides in the debate often talk past one another and fail to address one another's arguments, I aim to provide more clarification on the debate. Finally, by listing my two conditions for philosophical accounts of perception, I hope to make a more constructive debate on nonconceptual content possible.

## **Structure**

This thesis has the following structure. The first chapter provides an overview of the central issues within the debate on nonconceptual content. In the chapter, I discuss the commitments of, and motivations and challenges for both conceptualism and nonconceptualism. The second chapter analyzes the different methodologies preferred by both sides in the debate and proposes a solution to realize a more constructive debate. First, I argue that some participants in the debate on nonconceptual content talk past each other as a result of their different methodologies. Hereafter, I propose that philosophical accounts of perception must meet two conditions if conceptualist and nonconceptualist accounts are to properly address one another's arguments and concerns: (1) they must be compatible with what is known from the empirical sciences, specifically the science of perceptual psychology, and (2) they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences, including justification. In the third chapter, I argue that McDowell's conceptualism fails to meet one of the proposed conditions: although it remains unclear whether McDowell's account of perception is incompatible with principles,

assumptions and explanations from perceptual psychology and linguistics, McDowell's conceptualism does fail to account for some features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences. Chapter four sets out to defend nonconceptualism. I argue that nonconceptualism's prospects of meeting the two conditions are better than those of conceptualism: not only do findings and explanations from perceptual psychology and linguistics point towards the existence of and rely on the notion of nonconceptual perceptual content, nonconceptualism is able to provide a story of features of the relationship between concepts and experiences including justification. Finally, I summarize the thesis, discuss my findings, and share recommendations for future research in the conclusion.



## 1. An Overview of The Debate on Nonconceptual Content

The aim of this chapter is to shed light on the central issues within the debate on nonconceptual content. As said in the introduction to this thesis, participants in the debate on nonconceptual content agree that “experience represents the world and that an experience’s content is the way it represents things as being,” but disagree about whether the concepts a perceiver possesses limit the way one’s perceptions represent the world.<sup>11</sup> To better understand the disagreement between conceptualists and nonconceptualists, I discuss the commitments of, and motivations and challenges for both conceptualism and nonconceptualism, as well as the different ways in which one can be a conceptualist or nonconceptualist.

### 1.1 Nonconceptualism

In this section I first explain how the claim that content is nonconceptual is generally understood. As my thesis is concerned with the question of whether there are perceptual states with nonconceptual content, I want to clarify what nonconceptual content is supposed to be and explain what kind of states with nonconceptual content I am interested in. Second, I explain what the nonconceptualist position entails and what the commitments of nonconceptualist theorists are. Next, I discuss three of the main motivations for nonconceptualism. Finally, I specify the main challenge that nonconceptualists face.

#### 1.1.1 What is Nonconceptual Content?

According to Adrian Cussins, conceptual contents consist of conceptual properties, whereas nonconceptual contents consist of nonconceptual properties. He provides the following definitions of conceptual and nonconceptual properties:

A property is a *conceptual property* if, and only if, it is canonically characterized, relative to a theory, only by means of concepts which are such that an organism *must have* those concepts in order to satisfy the property.

A property is a *nonconceptual property* if, and only if, it is canonically characterized, relative to a theory, by means of concepts which are such that an organism *need not have* those concepts in order to satisfy the property.<sup>12</sup>

Something is canonically characterized if it is described in terms of the essential properties of that thing. For content, that is “a specification which reveals the way in which it presents the world.”<sup>13</sup>

Tim Crane builds on Cussins’ definition to construct his own definition of ‘conceptual content’ and ‘nonconceptual content’:

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Cussins, “Content, Conceptual Content, and Nonconceptual Content,” 134.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 160.

A state with conceptual content - e.g. a belief - is one such that the subject of that state has to possess the concepts that canonically characterise its content in order to be in that state. Any state with content that does not meet this condition has a nonconceptual content. [...]

For any state with content,  $S$ ,  $S$  has a nonconceptual content,  $P$ , iff a subject  $X$ 's being in  $S$  does not entail that  $X$  possesses the concepts that canonically characterise  $P$ .<sup>14</sup>

According to Crane, there are different states that fit with his definition of 'states with nonconceptual content'. To show that a state can represent without having conceptual content, Crane first discusses the example of a tree's rings, which represent (or carry information about) the tree being, for instance, fifty years old. Because trees have no mental states at all, Crane thinks we can be sure there is no sense in which the state of a tree can involve concepts. So, trees can represent without possessing any concepts. In contrast to the tree, for someone to believe that a tree is fifty years old, a believer needs to possess concepts such as 'fifty' and 'year'. Thus, "for something,  $X$ , to believe that  $a$  is  $F$ ,  $X$  must possess the concepts  $a$  and  $F$ . But for  $X$  to merely represent that  $a$  is  $F$ ,  $X$  does not have to possess these concepts. It is in the latter case that  $X$  is in a state with nonconceptual content."<sup>15</sup> Second, Crane discusses states of subpersonal computational systems such as the visual system. These are information-processing states of which the subject has no immediate awareness. Crane explains that "in order for a subject's visual system to compute its solution to the complex equations that take retinal information as input and a 3D description of the scene as output, the subject does not have to possess the concepts that canonically characterise these equations (though again, he or she may possess them)."<sup>16</sup> But both the states of the tree and the states of the visual system are not the states I am interested in. I want to restrict my discussion of the debate on nonconceptual content to the issue of whether representational perceptual states at the personal-level can have nonconceptual content.<sup>17</sup> This brings me to the third example that Crane discusses, which is the type of state that this thesis is concerned with: perceptual experiences. Similar to the tree's rings which represent the tree's age without the tree possessing any concepts, it can be said that someone's seeing that it is raining does not entail that that person possesses the concept 'rain'.<sup>18</sup>

### 1.1.2 The Nonconceptualist Position

To repeat, *nonconceptualism* is the position of those who hold that perceptual experience has a nonconceptual content.<sup>19</sup> The nonconceptual theorist is committed to the view that a subject need not master the concepts required for a theorist to specify (the correctness conditions for) that content.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Crane, "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience," 143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 138, 143.

<sup>17</sup> *Comment*: Some philosophers are concerned with the question of whether subpersonal information-processing systems represent the environment nonconceptually or whether non-perceptual states on the personal level are nonconceptual. More information on the difference between nonconceptual content at the subpersonal and personal level can be found in Bermúdez, "What Is at Stake in the Debate on Nonconceptual Content?," 55-58.

<sup>18</sup> Crane, "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience," 138, 143.

<sup>19</sup> Peacocke, "Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?," 244.

<sup>20</sup> Bermúdez, "What Is at Stake in the Debate on Nonconceptual Content?," 55-56, 66.

Advocates of nonconceptualism besides the aforementioned Evans are among others Christopher Peacocke, José Luis Bermúdez, Richard Heck, and the just mentioned Crane.

Evans was the first to explicitly argue that the content of perceptual experience is nonconceptual. In *The Varieties of Reference*, Evans argues that human beings are “gatherers, transmitters and storers of information.”<sup>21</sup> Evans explains that humans acquire information about the world through perception, communication and memory. These capacities are part of the *informational system*. On Evans's view, “the operations of the informational system are more primitive” than those of “far more sophisticated cognitive state[s]” such as beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Evans argues that “the informational states which a subject acquires through perception are *non-conceptual*, or *non-conceptualized*. Judgements *based upon* such states necessarily involve conceptualization: in moving from a perceptual experience to a judgement about the world (usually expressible in some verbal form), one will be exercising basic conceptual skills.”<sup>23</sup> So, a subject cannot be in a belief-like state if the contents of the state essentially involve concepts the subject does not master. This is not the case for perceptual states: it is possible to have a perceptual experience without mastering the necessary concepts that figure in a faithful report of that perception's content.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.1.3 The Motivations for Nonconceptualism

There are different motivations for nonconceptualism. I now discuss three of the main arguments for the position. A first motivation for nonconceptualism that is often discussed in the literature is the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception. In *The Varieties of Reference*, Evans poses the following rhetorical question: “No account of what it is to be in a non-conceptual informational state can be given in terms of dispositions to exercise concepts unless those concepts are assumed to be endlessly fine-grained; and does this make sense? Do we really understand the proposal that we have as many colour concepts as there are shades of colour that we can sensibly discriminate?”<sup>25</sup> One can probably perceptually discriminate many different shades of blue, without having concepts for all of those shades. Thus, according to the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception, perceptual contents are much more specific than the contents of propositional attitudes. Hence, abilities for perceptual discrimination exhaust conceptual capacities and therefore, the contents of perception are not constrained by the concepts one possesses.<sup>26</sup>

The second motivation for nonconceptualism is that the representational contents of perceptual experiences seem to have characteristics that the conceptual contents of propositional attitudes do not

---

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 122.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>24</sup> Heck, “Nonconceptual Content and the ‘Space of Reasons’,” 484.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 229.

<sup>26</sup> José Bermúdez and Arnon Cahen, “Nonconceptual Mental Content: 4.1 Perceptual experience and nonconceptual content,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/content-nonconceptual/> (accessed on 12-03-2019).

have. Whereas conceptual contents cannot be contradictory, perceptual experiences can represent contradictory states of affairs. Consider for example optical illusions. The nonconceptual theorist can argue that if optical illusions are states with contradictory content, and conceptual contents cannot be contradictory, perceptual experience cannot have (solely) conceptual contents.<sup>27</sup>

A third motivation for nonconceptualism is the argument from animal and infant perception. The argument is based on “phylogenetic and ontogenetic continuities in nature” that suggest that there are many similarities in the experience of nonlinguistic animals (including prelinguistic human infants) and humans with conceptual capacities.<sup>28</sup> For example, Peacocke argues that “cats, dogs, and animals of many other species, as well as human infants, perceive the world, even though their conceptual repertoire is limited, and perhaps even nonexistent.”<sup>29</sup> He explains that “these perceptions are subserved by perceptual organs, and in the case of higher species, subserved by brain structures similar in significant respects to those which subserve mature human perception.”<sup>30</sup> If the experiences of prelinguistic human infants and nonlinguistic animals are very similar to our own, this provides reason to assume that there are continuities between the representational contents of their experiences and our own. Then it follows that, if the perceptual representations of nonlinguistic animals, who either lack concepts at all or lack concepts rich enough to specify the content of their perceptual experiences, are similar to or the same as ours, perceptual content must be, at least partly, nonconceptual. Note that accepting the argument from animal and infant perception does not amount to denying that the experience of linguistic human beings might be richer than those of nonlinguistic beings. To the extent that we have some perceptual representations in common with nonlinguistic beings, the argument aims to show that at least part of the content of our perceptual experiences is nonconceptual.<sup>31</sup>

#### 1.1.4 The Challenges for Nonconceptualism

A major point of debate is whether nonconceptualism can explain how experiences ground our beliefs about the world. In his book *Mind and World*, McDowell argues that nonconceptualist accounts of perception cannot ascribe a rational role to perceptual experiences in the justification of perceptual beliefs and judgements. McDowell claims that any account that denies that perceptual experience is conceptual, including Evans's view, falls prey to either the *myth of the given* or fails to provide an external constraint on our empirical thinking. I now briefly explain what these criticisms mean.

According to McDowell, reason-constituting relations have their place in the *space of reasons*. This term is introduced by Wilfred Sellars to refer to a domain constituted by rational relations. Sellars explains that when one is “characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Peacocke, “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?,” 260.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Bermúdez and Cahen, “Nonconceptual Mental Content: 4.1 Perceptual experience and nonconceptual content”; Wright, “Nonconceptual Content.”

empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.”<sup>32</sup> McDowell assumes that the rational relations that hold between the items in the space of reasons can only exist between conceptual states. The first position McDowell attacks in *Mind and World* disagrees with this assumption. It is the position of those who think that unconceptualized experience, also referred to as *the given*, can give justifications for our perceptual beliefs or judgements. Therefore, they think that “the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere.”<sup>33</sup> But because of McDowell’s assumption that rational relations can only exist between conceptual states, McDowell does not think it is possible for the space of reasons to extend more widely than the conceptual sphere. As a consequence, McDowell argues that it is a myth that a state without conceptual content can ever be a reason for a belief. Rather than providing justifications for our perceptual beliefs or judgements, the given can only provide us exculpations.<sup>34</sup>

The second position that McDowell criticizes in *Mind and World* is *coherentism*. Like the philosophers who appeal to the given, Donald Davidson, an advocate of coherentism, also assumes that experiences are nonconceptual. Unlike nonconceptualists, Davidson agrees with McDowell that unconceptualized experience cannot provide reasons for beliefs, but he argues that that is because perceptual experiences cannot justify beliefs at all. According to Davidson, perceptions can cause beliefs, but only beliefs can justify beliefs. McDowell argues against Davidson that his position fails to explain how experience can lead to representation of the empirical world at all. The position fails to provide an external constraint on our empirical thinking: if our beliefs are to represent the empirical world at all, we need a constraint from outside our own thinking. It therefore cannot be the case that only beliefs give reasons for beliefs about the world.<sup>35</sup>

McDowell concludes that both positions (giving a justificatory role to unconceptualized experience or giving no justificatory role to experience at all) fail. In the end, as I will explain shortly, McDowell feels that only conceptualism meets the need for an external constraint on our thinking (unlike coherentism) and acknowledges that only something with conceptual content can play the justificatory role for our perceptual beliefs and judgements (unlike appealing to the given).

Of course, nonconceptual theorists need not agree with McDowell’s assumption that only something with conceptual content can play a justificatory role in the justification of perceptual beliefs and judgements. Still, they need to respond to the challenge presented by McDowell by giving a story of how nonconceptual perceptual contents can be an epistemically suitable ground for our perceptual beliefs and judgements. I elaborate on this challenge in the next chapter (see section 2.2.2).

---

<sup>32</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1, no. 19 (1956): 298-299.

<sup>33</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 6-7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-24.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

## 1.2 Conceptualism

In this section I first explain what the conceptualist position entails. Next, I discuss the epistemological consideration that motivates nonconceptualism. Finally, I discuss three challenges for conceptualism.

### 1.2.1 The Conceptualist Position

Many philosophers are *belief conceptualists*: they hold that a subject can have a belief that an object  $x$  is property  $F$  if and only if that subject possesses and deploys in the belief the concepts for both the object and the property. This position entails that one's beliefs differ depending on the concepts one has. For example, it follows that one cannot have a belief about a lion, for example that lions live in Sub-Saharan Africa, if one lacks the concept 'lion' and thus has no idea what a lion is. Another example is that if one lacks the concept 'liger', one can have the belief that crosses between a lion and tiger have both spots and stripes without believing that ligers have both spots and stripes (although ligers are a cross between a lion and a tiger).

Some philosophers argue that a similar relation exists between experiences and concepts. (*Experience*) *conceptualism* is the position of those who hold that a subject can have an experience of object  $x$  being property  $F$ , if and only if that subject possesses and deploys the concepts of both that object and that property in the experience.<sup>36</sup> In other words, *conceptualism* is the position of those who hold that perceptual content is conceptual in nature.<sup>37</sup> Conceptual theorists believe that a subject needs to master the concepts required for a theorist to specify (the correctness conditions for) the content.<sup>38</sup> The most well-known advocates of conceptualism besides McDowell are Sonia Sedivy and Bill Brewer.

But what are concepts supposed to be according to these conceptualists? Concepts are usually defined as the constituents of propositions. Many philosophers equate propositions with thoughts. A popular way to think about concepts is as abstract objects or as *Fregean senses*. On Frege's view, thoughts are the senses of sentences; a thinker grasps a thought through the sentences used to express that thought. Through thinking a certain thought (believing that something is the case), we relate ourselves to an abstract object (the thought in question), which we judge to be true or false.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.2.2 The Motivations for Conceptualism

Conceptualism is usually supported by epistemological considerations. The epistemological motivation for conceptualism is that conceptualism can easily explain how beliefs and judgements are rationally grounded in experiences: beliefs or judgements simply endorse the contents of experiences. As already mentioned in the section about challenges for nonconceptualism, McDowell argues for this point in his book *Mind and World*. The project in *Mind and World* is to re-establish a Kantian account of perception

---

<sup>36</sup> Siegel, "The Contents of Perception: 6. Concepts and Content."

<sup>37</sup> Peacocke, "Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?," 244.

<sup>38</sup> Bermúdez, "What Is at Stake in the Debate on Nonconceptual Content?," 55-56, 66.

<sup>39</sup> José Luis Bermúdez, *Thinking without Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14-19.

on the basis of Kant's insight that "thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind."<sup>40</sup> In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant distinguishes between two abilities of the mind: sensibility, which is the ability to "receive presentations insofar as [our mind's receptivity] is affected in some manner, and the mind's understanding, which is the ability to "produce presentations ourselves, i.e., our *spontaneity* of cognition."<sup>41</sup> Our mind's receptivity enables us to perceive objects, the spontaneity of our cognition enables us to think about those objects. Building on this distinction, McDowell explains that empirical knowledge can only arise if experience involves both receptivity and spontaneity (i.e. the use of conceptual capacities or "the freedom that empowers us to take charge of our active thinking").<sup>42</sup> McDowell believes that without this cooperation, thoughts cannot have content: "Thoughts without content – which would not really be thoughts at all – would be a play of concepts without any connection with intuitions, that is, bits of experiential intake. It is their connection with experiential intake that supplies the content, the substance, that thoughts would otherwise lack."<sup>43</sup>

These Kantian insights lead McDowell to accept a conception of experiences as "impressions made by the world on our senses, products of receptivity; but those impressions themselves already have conceptual content."<sup>44</sup> Experiences are thus, unlike beliefs, products of receptivity, but are, like beliefs, available to spontaneity (since conceptual capacities belong to the faculty of spontaneity). According to conceptualists such as McDowell, such a view is the only position that can account for the rational relationship between perceptual experiences and beliefs. Conceiving of experiences as products of receptivity means thinking of experiences as passive states; the world "saddles" us with the perceptual content of an experience, thereby providing a constraint from outside our thinking on our empirical thoughts. That conceptual capacities are involved in experience guarantees that experience involves *openness* to the world. This is the idea that "in experiences one can take in how things are," which means that we can stand in direct contact with the world through experience.<sup>45</sup>

Inspired by a remark of Wittgenstein, McDowell assumes that conceptualism is a requirement for such openness. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein claims the following: "Thought must be something unique. When we say, and mean, that such-and-such is the case, we – and our meaning – do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this – is – so*."<sup>46</sup> In a similar spirit, McDowell claims that "there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is*

---

<sup>40</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason," in *Classics of Western Philosophy*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn, 8th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Incorporation, 2012), 1070, B75.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 4, 9, 70; John McDowell, "Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson: Library of Living Philosophers XXVII*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999), 87-88.

<sup>43</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>45</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 10, 25, 66-67, 111.

<sup>46</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 44.

what is the case.”<sup>47</sup> If what is the case is not outside the sphere of the conceptual, the content of perceptions, if they are to capture what is the case, must be conceptual as well.<sup>48</sup> So, our thoughts and perceptions need to have the same kind of content and our conceptual capacities need to be operative in both for an unproblematic relation between perceptions and beliefs and the world to exist: only then is it possible to believe exactly what we perceive and to think and perceive what is the case.<sup>49</sup>

### **1.2.3 The Challenges for Conceptualism**

Nonconceptualists point out that the conceptualist position faces some challenges. I will discuss three of them. First, conceptualists have to deal with the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception. As explained before, the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception aims to show that perceptual contents are much more specific than the contents of propositional attitudes, and that therefore, abilities for perceptual discrimination seem to exhaust conceptual capacities. From these premises, nonconceptual theorists conclude that the contents of perception are not limited by one's conceptual repertoire.<sup>50</sup> McDowell thinks it is possible to undercut this argument. He argues that the conclusion that our abilities for perceptual discrimination outstrip our conceptual capacities is mistaken. According to McDowell, nonconceptualists like Evans make a mistake in thinking that our conceptual beliefs about color are restricted to concepts such as 'blue' or 'red'. McDowell argues that demonstrative concepts can also figure in the conceptual content of perceptual experience: “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.”<sup>51</sup> According to McDowell, these kind of demonstrative concepts can represent for example shades of colors with the same level of specificity or fineness of grain as the experience can. Note, however, that McDowell's response is not an argument for conceptualism. The possibility that all the content of a perceptual experience is conceptualizable by the subject does not show that the subject needs to possess all these concepts to be able to have the perceptual experience.<sup>52</sup>

Another challenge for conceptual theorists, who deny that prelinguistic human infants and nonlinguistic animals possess concepts, is that they have to maintain that these beings do not have experiences with representational content. This follows from the idea that one can occupy the space of reasons only when one possesses concepts and can engage in conceptual activity. According to McDowell, these skills require mastery of language. That is because on McDowell's view, one can only

---

<sup>47</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> McDowell, “Conceptual Capacities in Perception,” in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*, 142.

<sup>49</sup> Wright, “Nonconceptual Content.”

<sup>50</sup> Bermúdez and Cahen, “Nonconceptual Mental Content: 4.1 Perceptual experience and nonconceptual content.”

<sup>51</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 56-57.

<sup>52</sup> Bermúdez and Cahen, “Nonconceptual Mental Content: 4.1 Perceptual experience and nonconceptual content.”



be initiated into the space of reasons by the right education or upbringing (*Bildung*). One needs to learn to “be at home with normative discourse, responsive to reasons as such, sensitive to standards of correctness and appropriateness.”<sup>53</sup> Because this education takes place in language-using communities, only speakers of a language can occupy the space of reasons.<sup>54</sup> Since only beings that can engage in “active thinking,” beings that occupy the space of reasons, can make judgements about the world being a certain way, McDowell argues that only they can be attributed to possess experiences. He does not deny that animals and prelinguistic infants are not perceptually sensitive to features of their environment, but this does not amount to having experience.<sup>55</sup>

According to Tyler Burge, this claim can be easily refuted empirically. Burge believes that the perceptual capacities of human beings are related to those of many other animals with genuine perceptual capacities. On the basis of what is known from “perceptual psychology (mainly vision science), physiological sensory psychology, developmental psychology, animal psychology, ethology, and zoology,” Burge argues that humans “share representational mind, exercised in perception, with a breathtakingly wide range of animals.”<sup>56</sup> The ability to veridically represent the physical environment in perception is thus not special to human beings.<sup>57</sup> However, as I will argue, Burge and McDowell disagree on the meaning of ‘experience’. If the disagreement between Burge and McDowell is merely a terminological one, McDowell can argue against Burge that he mistakes an animal’s sensitivity to its environment for experience as rich as conceptualized experience. I elaborate on this issue in chapter 3 (see section 3.1.1).

A third challenge that conceptualists face is giving an adequate explanation of the acquisition of observational concepts. Most philosophers agree that the most plausible explanation of the acquisition of observational concepts is that to acquire a certain observational concept, one needs to have an appropriate perceptual experience to learn the meaning of the concept. Peacocke, among others, has pointed out that if we accept this explanation, and also accept conceptualism, problems of circularity arise. According to the conceptual theorist, a subject can only be in a certain perceptual state if that subject masters the concepts needed to specify the contents of the perception. This commitment leads to a circular explanation of observational concept acquisition: one can be in the perceptual state that is necessary to acquire a certain concept (for example the shape concept *pyramid*) only if one already

---

<sup>53</sup> Willem A. DeVries, “Wilfrid Sellars,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/sellars/> (accessed on 13-06-2019).

<sup>54</sup> Maximilian de Gaynesford, *John McDowell* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 28; McDowell, *Mind and World*, xx; John McDowell, “Sellars and the Space of Reasons,” Lecture in Cape-town (2004), <http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/me-core/downloads/McD%20Cape%20Town%20talk--Sellars%20EPM.doc> (accessed on 26-04-2019).

<sup>55</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Tyler Burge, *Origins of Objectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xi, xiii; Wright, “Nonconceptual Content.”

<sup>57</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 11.

possesses that concept, and then no learning occurs.<sup>58</sup> The strange consequence is that a subject can only be in the perceptual state necessary to learn the observational concept if “the lesson were unnecessary.”<sup>59</sup>

### 1.3 The State View and Content View

The characterizations of conceptualism and nonconceptualism are not complete yet. According to Heck, there are different ways in which one can be a nonconceptualist or conceptualist. That is because the difference or similarity between states like perceptual states and representational states such as beliefs can be interpreted in two different ways: the distinction can be seen as one between two different types of states or between two different types of content. These views are called the *state view* and the *content view* respectively. I now clarify which of these views are accepted by the philosophers I have discussed.

According to the nonconceptualist state view, perceptual states and belief-like states share exactly the same type of content, but the one is concept-independent whilst the other is not. States are concept-dependent if it is necessary for a subject to possess the concepts required to specify the content of a token state of a given type to be in that token state. A state is concept-independent if it is possible for a subject to be in a token state of a given type without having (all the) concepts required to specify the contents of that state. The state view, on which there exists only one type of content, contrasts with the content view. On the nonconceptualist content view, the difference between states with nonconceptual content and states with conceptual content is that the content is different in kind: whereas the one content is nonconceptual in nature, the other is conceptual.<sup>60</sup>

In the remainder of this thesis, I focus on the content view of nonconceptualism. That is because this is the view that can be attributed to most conceptual theorists (including Evans) and is attacked by conceptualists (such as McDowell).<sup>61</sup> The reason that most defenders of nonconceptual content adhere to the content view is that, at least according to Bermúdez, the state view cannot be defended adequately by nonconceptual theorists. He provides multiple arguments for this claim. One of them is that advocates of the state view cannot provide us with a plausible answer to the question of where the principled distinction between concept dependent state-types and concept-independent state-types in the state view comes from: “Why is it the case that beliefs do, while perceptions do not, respect the conceptual constraint?”<sup>62</sup> Whilst proponents of the content view can appeal to a difference in the type of content, proponents of the state view need a different story. Bermúdez explains that “on the one hand, [the state view theorist] can turn to the different functional roles of the respective state-types,” and on the other

---

<sup>58</sup> Bermúdez and Cahen, “Nonconceptual Mental Content: 4.1 Perceptual experience and nonconceptual content”; Wayne Wright, “Nonconceptual Content.”

<sup>59</sup> Peacocke, “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?,” 252-253.

<sup>60</sup> Heck, “Nonconceptual Content and the ‘Space of Reasons’,” 485-486.

<sup>61</sup> Bermúdez, “What Is at Stake in the Debate on Nonconceptual Content?,” 66; Heck, “Nonconceptual Content and the ‘Space of Reasons’,” 485; Richard G. Heck, “Are There Different Kinds of Content?,” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 119-120.

<sup>62</sup> Bermúdez, “What Is at Stake in the Debate on Nonconceptual Content?,” 67-68.

hand, “she can look to their different phenomenologies for an explanation of the difference between concept-dependent and concept independent state-types,” which are neither plausible alternatives according to Bermúdez.<sup>63</sup>

And as just mentioned, the epistemological issues raised by McDowell apply to the content view of nonconceptualism only. The state view in itself is neutral on the issue of what kinds of contents perceptual states have, so, a defender of the state view can maintain that perceptual states and cognitive states like beliefs have the same kind of content. This is not the case for defenders of the content view: they need to explain how perceptual experience can give us reason for a belief if the contents of perceptual states and beliefs are different.<sup>64</sup>

As for the conceptualists themselves, McDowell, Brewer and Sedivy are so-called ‘pure conceptualists’: they endorse both the state and the content view of conceptualism. They believe that perceptual content is constituted by concepts, and that the perceiving subject must possess and deploy in their experience the concepts needed to specify the content of that experience.<sup>65</sup>

#### **1.4 Summary**

To summarize, there are different motivations and challenges for conceptualism and nonconceptualism. Important arguments for nonconceptualism are the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception, the argument that perceptual experiences and propositional attitudes have different characteristics, and the argument from animal and infant perception. The most important argument for conceptualism is the epistemological consideration that nonconceptualism has a hard time explaining how beliefs are rationally grounded in experiences. Conceptualism, unlike nonconceptualism, has problems with accounting for how we learn observational concepts and how human perception is similar to animal and infant perception.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>64</sup> Heck, “Are There Different Kinds of Content?,” 119-120.

<sup>65</sup> Wright, “Nonconceptual Content.”

## 2. Two Conditions for Accounts of Perception

The two purposes of this chapter are as follows. First, I show that many conceptualists and nonconceptualists often dismiss one another's arguments as a result of their different approaches to examining the nature of perceptual content. This complicates evaluating the strength of the arguments of both positions. To make a fair examination possible, I next attempt to find common ground between conceptualists and nonconceptualists by arguing that philosophical accounts of perception must meet two conditions to stop talking past each other.

### 2.1 Methodological Approaches to the Debate on Nonconceptual Content

In this section, I show that the motivations for conceptualism and nonconceptualism differ in nature. Next, I explain how these different motivations result from different views on the proper methodological approach to the debate. Finally, I argue why these different approaches stand in the way of a constructive debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists.

#### 2.1.1 The Varied Nature of Motivations in the Debate

In chapter 1, I listed the most important motivations and challenges for conceptualism and nonconceptualism. With this overview of the most important arguments in place, I can now analyze the nature of the different kinds of motivations that support both positions. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception*, Wright claims that “nonconceptualists tend to stress either features of the relationship between concepts and experience besides justification [...] or a range of empirical findings and introspective observations that clash with the conceptualist's thesis.”<sup>66</sup> To a large extent, I think that the arguments that nonconceptualists provide can be characterized according to Wright's remark. The argument that perceptual experiences and propositional attitudes have different characteristics is an example of an argument that stresses features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences (which are contrasted with features of the relationship between concepts and propositional attitudes like beliefs) besides justification. The other arguments are clear examples of arguments motivated by empirical findings. The charge that conceptualists cannot deal with observational concept acquisition and that empirical findings conflict with the assumption that human perception *qualitatively* differs from animal and infant perception can both be supported by results from the cognitive sciences, among which perceptual psychology, developmental psychology and linguistics, or introspective observation.

Conceptualists focus on different kinds of arguments. On the nature of their arguments, Wright writes that “conceptualists such as Brewer and McDowell are chiefly wrangling with epistemological considerations.”<sup>67</sup> And indeed, McDowell's charge that perceptual experience, if conceived as

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

nonconceptual, cannot justify judgements or beliefs about the external world is clearly an example of an epistemological consideration.

Much attention in the available literature is spent on the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception, but the given classification of arguments does not seem to apply to the argument. However, I do not think that is a concern. Although many proponents of the content view of nonconceptualism use the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception in favor of their position, it must be noted that the conclusion of the argument (i.e., that one's perceptions are constrained by the concepts one possesses) can only establish the state view of nonconceptualism, not the content view. The conclusion does not prove that the content of perceptions and beliefs must be different in nature. If successful, the argument only shows that perceptions are concept-independent states. Because the content view of nonconceptualism does not depend on the argument, I do not think it is necessary to discuss the argument further in this thesis.

### **2.1.2 Empirical Approach of Nonconceptualists and the Armchair Approach of Conceptualists**

We have seen that the motivations for conceptualism and nonconceptualism differ in nature. I now explain how these correspond to different views on the proper methodological approach to examining the nature of perceptual content. I start with the approach of nonconceptualists. Although not all nonconceptualists rely solely on empirical findings to support their position, many consider empirical arguments to be the most important. For example, consider Burge's response to the debate on nonconceptual content: "My view that perceptual representation does not have the form of propositional content rests largely on reflection on the commitments and requirements of explanation in perceptual psychology. Propositional structures are not attributed in mainstream explanations. Nor do there seem to be any distinctively propositional capacities in perception that such structures are needed to explain."<sup>68</sup> So, according to Burge, the commitments and requirements of explanation in perceptual psychology, rather than philosophical reflections, are decisive in the debate on nonconceptual content.

Jerry Fodor goes even further still. In "The Revenge of the Given," he claims that the question of whether there is nonconceptual content is an empirical question and not a philosophical one. In the conclusion to his paper, Fodor states that whether there is nonconceptual perceptual content is "no philosopher's business."<sup>69</sup> Because Fodor claims that there is good empirical reason to assume there is nonconceptual content in perception, he argues this is a big problem for philosophers who use a priori arguments to show that only perceptual experiences with conceptual representational content can ground perceptual judgements or beliefs. So, for Fodor, philosophical reflection cannot provide an answer to the question of what the nature of perceptual content is, only the empirical sciences are able to do so. Fodor does acknowledge that addressing epistemological concerns requires philosophical reflection.

---

<sup>68</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 539.

<sup>69</sup> Jerry Fodor, "The Revenge of the Given," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 105, 113.

However, only once we have settled on an answer to the question of what the nature of perceptual content is (by relying on empirical findings and empirical explanations of perception), philosophers can examine whether or not that type of content is able to ground perceptual judgements and beliefs.<sup>70</sup>

Conceptualist McDowell has a different methodological approach than the nonconceptualists just discussed. Rather than first considering the mechanisms of perception itself, McDowell sets a condition that perception must meet to be able to provide epistemic warrant for perceptual judgements and beliefs. It is this condition that prescribes what the nature of perceptual content ought to be (given that perceptual experiences must provide epistemic warrant for our perceptual judgements, and can only do so, according to McDowell, if their contents are conceptual). McDowell thus has a very different approach to examining the nature of perceptual content than his nonconceptualist colleagues: reflection on epistemological considerations, rather than reflection on empirical findings and empirical scientific explanations, will answer the question of what the nature of perceptual content is.

Accordingly, McDowell ascribes different roles to cognitive psychology and philosophy:

I am not saying there is something wrong with just any notion of nonconceptual content. It would be dangerous to deny, from a philosophical armchair, that cognitive psychology is an intellectually respectable discipline, at least so long as it stays within its proper bounds. And it is hard to see how cognitive psychology could get along without attributing content to internal states and occurrences in a way that is not constrained by the conceptual capacities, if any, of the creatures whose lives it tries to make intelligible. But it is a recipe for trouble if we blur the distinction between the respectable theoretical role that nonconceptual content has in cognitive psychology, on the one hand, and, on the other, the notion of content that belongs with the capacities exercised in active self-conscious thinking—as if the contentfulness of our thoughts and conscious experiences could be understood as a welling-up to the surface of some of the content that a good psychological theory would attribute to goings-on in our cognitive machinery.<sup>71</sup>

To clarify, according to McDowell, two types of accounts of perception can be given. The first type is an account of the individual's perception given by philosophy, the second is an account of the information processing by the individual's subsystems that make perception possible given by cognitive psychology. According to McDowell, only accounts of the first type can attribute genuine representational content. Accounts of the second type do no more than specifying the enabling conditions for perception. McDowell thinks it is fine to talk about nonconceptual content in accounts such as these, but argues this talk is "metaphorical": "The processes and contents that figure in theories pitched at this level are claimed to be only causally relevant to the 'real' (i.e. genuinely semantic or intentional) content that figures in perception and thought. [...] They play no role in constituting the contents of experiences of and thoughts about the world, as by their very nature they are blind to the world."<sup>72</sup> So, according to McDowell, cognitive psychology is unable to state anything about the nature

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 105, 114-115.

<sup>71</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 55.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, "Nonconceptual Content."

of perception.<sup>73</sup> This view on the role of cognitive psychology clearly contrasts with the role ascribed to it by the nonconceptualists discussed above.

### **2.1.3 Why Realizing a Constructive Debate is Difficult**

In the introduction to this thesis, I mentioned that Wright claims that participants in the debate on nonconceptual content often talk past one another because they are driven by different types of motivations.<sup>74</sup> However, I argue that the divergence emerges at an even more fundamental level. As I just described, I believe that conceptualists and nonconceptualists have a different approach to examining the nature of perceptual content. This approach results from different interpretations of the question of what the nature of perceptual content is. Whereas McDowell thinks the question is a purely philosophical one, many nonconceptualists disagree. They believe that, at least in part, arriving at an answer to the question of what the nature of perceptual content is requires reflection on empirical findings and empirical scientific explanations.

From these different interpretations of the central question in the debate follow different conceptions of the role of philosophy versus the role of empirical science. For nonconceptualists, examining the nature of perceptual content requires empirical scientific knowledge of (the mechanisms of) perception itself. McDowell, on the other hand, rejects the idea that empirical sciences such as cognitive psychology are in a position to make any claims about the nature of perception, they can merely specify the enabling conditions for perception. McDowell does ascribe a central role to philosophy in examining the nature of perceptual content: he thinks that we can arrive at answers about the nature of perceptual content from the philosophical armchair. In contrast, nonconceptualists such as Burge and Fodor reject the idea that a priori reflection is sufficient for this task. Especially for Fodor, philosophy's role is limited to solving epistemological issues once the nature of perceptual content has already been established.

In turn, the different interpretations of the central question in the debate on nonconceptual content and the corresponding conceptions of the role of philosophy and the empirical sciences lead to different expectations and demands for philosophical accounts of perception, which explains why conceptualists and nonconceptualists are driven by different motivations. But these different motivations are merely consequences of the more fundamental divergence between conceptualists and nonconceptualists. I argue that their different interpretations of, and the corresponding methodological approaches to, the question of what the nature of perceptual content is, are what causes both sides in the debate to talk past one another. On the one hand, conceptualists, who hold that establishing the nature of perceptual content is a purely philosophical matter, will deny that empirical findings and empirical scientific explanations should inform their philosophical accounts and can be used to refute their position. On the other hand, nonconceptualists, who think that philosophical accounts of perception must

---

<sup>73</sup> Tyler Burge, "Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology," *Philosophical Topics* 33, no. 1 (2005): 45-46.

<sup>74</sup> Wright, "Nonconceptual Content."

be informed by the empirical sciences, will deny that their position can be refuted on a priori grounds alone. As a consequence, the arguments provided for and against both positions fail to be genuinely persuasive in the eyes of the opponent. In turn, this makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to convince one another of one's arguments and to evaluate the strength of both positions.

## **2.2 Proposal for Two Conditions**

In the previous section, I argued that the different approaches of conceptualists and nonconceptualists do not allow for a constructive debate as the most important arguments from the opposing side are immediately dismissed. In this section, I attempt to find some common ground between the two positions. To solve the issue of philosophers talking past each other in the debate on nonconceptual content and to make a fair assessment of both positions possible, I propose that philosophical accounts of perception must meet two conditions to properly address one another's concerns: (1) they must be compatible with what is known from the empirical sciences, and (2) they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and experience including justification. In what follows, I argue why we should accept both conditions.

### **2.2.1 Compatibility with the Empirical Sciences**

The first condition I propose concerns philosophy's relation to the empirical sciences. I disagree with philosophers who argue that examining the nature of perceptual content is "no philosopher's business."<sup>75</sup> I do not think the central issues of the debate will be solved by relying on empirical information alone. Questions about the relationship between concepts and experiences and the justification of perceptual beliefs and perceptual judgements are among the central issues in the debate, and these require philosophical reflection. However, philosophical accounts that conflict with what is known from empirical science are not of much use. If perceivers do not have the capacities and capabilities that epistemology prescribes, we can question the usefulness and applicability of philosophical accounts of perception. To find out about the capacities and capabilities of perceivers, we must know more about the mechanisms of perception. And since it is up to the empirical sciences to find out and describe how perception works, this means that the answers must not be in conflict with empirical scientific knowledge. Fodor seems to agree with me:

I don't see that the epistemology of perception can simply ignore the empirical question how perception works. Quite generally, justifying a belief cannot require a thinker to do such-and-such unless the thinker has the kind of mind that can do such-and-such. (It cannot require him to introspectively access the preconceptual grounds of his beliefs unless he has the kind of mind that has introspective access to the preconceptual grounds of belief.) I've heard it said that how perception works doesn't matter to epistemologists because theirs is a normative not a descriptive enterprise. But how could one be bound by norms that one is, in point of nomological necessity, unable to satisfy? And what is the conceivable interest, even to epistemologists, of norms that don't bind us?<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Fodor, "The Revenge of the Given," 105, 113.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.



And Burge expresses a similar thought:

Norms for perceptual belief must be grounded in the relation of perceptual belief to perception and in the character of perception. Epistemic norms apply to the sorts of representational states that knowers in fact have. Epistemology cannot dictate to psychology. Nor should it exclude perception from its domain because perception does not meet an armchair conception of what form epistemic norms must take. One cannot carry on epistemology in the absence of understanding what perception is. The failure to isolate perception as a distinctive representational kind has seriously limited understanding of empirical knowledge.<sup>77</sup>

And:

One can no longer pronounce from the armchair on the form and nature of human perception. Such issues are to be determined by empirical investigation, not by armchair pronouncements uninformed by understanding the relevant science. Human perception is the subject matter of a science. Philosophy of perception must incorporate informed philosophy of science.<sup>78</sup>

William Fish concurs with my idea in the *Routledge Introduction to the Philosophy of Perception*. He writes: “For one thing, philosophical theorizing must also be informed by scientific findings—a philosophical theory that [...] is inconsistent with scientific findings will not be of much value.”<sup>79</sup> I agree with Fish that it is fair to require that philosophical accounts of perception meet the condition of being compatible with what is known about perception from the empirical sciences. I disagree with Fish’s stronger claim that philosophical accounts of perception must necessarily be informed by the empirical sciences. I think this condition already casts aside philosophers who prefer an armchair approach to philosophy like McDowell, which I elaborate on in the next chapter (see section 3.1). Therefore, I only set the minimum requirement that philosophical accounts of perception must (at least) be consistent with empirical findings and empirical scientific explanations.<sup>80</sup>

### 2.2.2 Story of the Features of the Relationship between Concepts and Perceptual Experiences

The second condition that I propose is concerned with features of the relationship between concepts and perceptions. This condition is a response to the challenge that McDowell raises for nonconceptualism. McDowell’s conceptualism explains that judgements endorse the contents of experience: “*That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement: it becomes the content of a judgement if the subject decides to take the experience at face value.”<sup>81</sup> This view is not available for nonconceptualist theorists. As explained before, nonconceptualists draw a stark contrast between experiences and judgements. If the content of perceptual experiences is nonconceptual, “a

---

<sup>77</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 435.

<sup>78</sup> Tyler Burge, “Disjunctivism Again,” *Philosophical Explorations* 14, no.1 (2011): 71.

<sup>79</sup> Fish, *Philosophy of Perception*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Comment*: I made a similar claim in my Honours Bachelor’s Thesis: Loren Bremmers, *A Comparison of Davidson’s and McDowell’s Accounts of Perceptual Beliefs*, Honours Bachelor’s Thesis (2017), <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/353882> (accessed on 01-05-2019), 25-26.

<sup>81</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 26.

different species of content comes into play” when one judges about one’s experience.<sup>82</sup> According to McDowell, this is where a big problem arises. He does not think that experiences with nonconceptual content can be “available to spontaneity: that it is a candidate for being integrated into the conceptually organized world-view of a self-conscious thinker.”<sup>83</sup> McDowell argues that positions that deny that experience involves conceptual capacities cannot claim that reason-constituting relations hold between experiences and judgements. According to McDowell, experiences cannot be reasons for judgements “while being outside the reach of rational inquiry.”<sup>84</sup> That is because “it is essential to the picture [McDowell is] recommending that experience has its content by virtue of the drawing into operation, in sensibility, of capacities that are genuinely elements in a faculty of spontaneity. The very same capacities must also be able to be exercised in judgements, and that requires them to be rationally linked into a whole system of concepts and conceptions within which their possessor engages in a continuing activity of adjusting her thinking to experience.”<sup>85</sup> The nonconceptualist needs a convincing reply to McDowell’s conclusion that for rational relations to hold between experiences and judgements – for a judgement to be able to endorse the content of the perceptual experience that grounds it – the content of experience must be conceptual.<sup>86</sup>

How should philosophers of perception deal with McDowell’s epistemological consideration? Although nonconceptualists are usually concerned with empirical findings rather than with epistemological considerations, Fish argues that theories of perception cannot ignore such considerations: “[...] another key consideration for the philosopher of perception will be to develop a theory that both informs, and is informed by, epistemological considerations. A further consideration for a theory of perception, then, will be how well it can make sense of perception’s role as a source of empirical knowledge.”<sup>87</sup> I agree with Fish. Therefore, my second condition for philosophical accounts of perception is that they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and experience including justification. This entails that any account of perception should respond to McDowell’s challenge of how perceptual experiences can justify beliefs and judgements about the world. So, the challenge for the nonconceptualist lies in explaining how the nonconceptual contents of experience can be captured in beliefs or judgements; how does the process of conceptualization take place?

### **2.3 Summary**

In this chapter, I explained that, as a result of the different methodological approaches of conceptualists and nonconceptualists, participants in the debate on nonconceptual content are often talking past each other. Because I believe that the most important arguments from both sides in the debate present

---

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>87</sup> Fish, *Philosophy of Perception*, 2.

challenges that no philosophical account of perception can ignore. I proposed two conditions that any philosophical account of perception must meet if they are to address the challenges and concerns raised by their opponents: (1) they must be compatible with what is known from the empirical sciences, and (2) they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and experience including justification. The first condition aims to establish that philosophical accounts of perception are about capacities and capabilities that humans or animals really have, thereby guaranteeing their usefulness and applicability. The second condition aims to establish that philosophers of perception do not simply dismiss McDowell's challenge of explaining how perceptual experiences can justify beliefs about the world. With the two conditions in place, I can examine to what extent conceptualism and nonconceptualism meet the two conditions in the following chapters.

### **3. The Shortcomings of Conceptualism**

In this chapter I argue that McDowell's conceptualism fails to meet one of the conditions I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception. In the first section of the chapter, I explain why it is difficult to assess whether and how aspects of McDowell's conceptualism are (in)compatible with empirical scientific knowledge. In the second section, I argue that, although McDowell offers a convincing story of the justification of perceptual beliefs and perceptual judgements by perceptual experience, his conceptualism fails to account for other features of the relationship between concepts and experience.

#### **3.1 Conceptualism and Empirical Science**

In the previous chapter, I set the minimum requirement that philosophical accounts of perception must be consistent with, if not informed by, empirical findings and empirical scientific explanations. In this section, I discuss two aspects of McDowell's account of perception that seem to conflict with what is known from the empirical sciences about (the mechanisms of) perception. First, I discuss McDowell's distinction between human and animal/infant perception. Second, I discuss McDowell's view on the difference between veridical perceptions and hallucinations.

##### **3.1.1 The Distinction between Human and Animal/Infant Perception**

In chapter 1, I pointed out that conceptualists like McDowell have to maintain that human perception is unlike the perception of nonlinguistic animals and prelinguistic infants. According to Burge, this idea can be easily refuted empirically. In this subsection, in line with my discussion of the reason why participants in the debate on nonconceptual content talk past each other, I show the disagreement to be more complicated. In an attempt to better understand the disagreement between the two, I briefly explain how McDowell's conceptualism commits him to the idea that human and animal/infant perception differ in a way that is not shared by nonconceptualists such as Burge. Next, I present a three-stage argument against conceptualism. First, I argue that Burge's and McDowell's disagreement results from a terminological dispute. Second, as a result of their terminological dispute, I believe that the empirical findings that Burge takes to support his position are insufficient to refute McDowell's view. Finally, I argue that, although McDowell's position cannot directly be refuted by empirical findings, some explanations in the field of linguistics go against some of McDowell's underlying assumptions.

###### **3.1.1.1 Burge and McDowell on Human Perception Versus Animal/Infant Perception**

In contrast to McDowell, nonconceptualists claim that both humans and nonlinguistic animals have experiences with nonconceptual content. They hold that on top of their perceptions, humans have something extra (i.e., their conceptual capacities) which allows them to form beliefs and make judgements about those contents. McDowell describes this idea as follows: "the idea is that mere animals already enjoy perceptual experience in which the world strikes them as being a certain way, and the only

difference our understanding makes for us is that we can impose conceptual form on the already world-representing but less than conceptual content that, like them, we receive in experience.”<sup>88</sup>

Burge thinks that there are strong empirical grounds that support the nonconceptualist position. Consider the following quote in which he explains that explanations of the workings of the perceptual system do not need to attribute conceptual capacities to perceivers (even though he seems to think that some animals have them):

I think that there is a structural difference between perception and propositional attitudes. Perceptual systems are very widespread among animals. A much more limited range of animals, including humans, have propositional attitudes – including propositional perceptual beliefs. There is evidence that apes have them. Probably several other non-human animals have them. There is, however, strong empirical ground to believe that the abilities of many of the animals that have perceptual systems can be fully explained without appeal to states with propositional structure. Explanations of perceptual systems do not attribute propositional contents or propositional states to perceivers or perceptual systems, in any non-trivial way.<sup>89</sup>

As I explained before, McDowell does not share this view. He thinks that the perceptions of humans and beings without conceptual capacities are entirely different in kind; only beings with conceptual capacities can have genuine experience of the world through perception, beings without are merely sensitive to their environments. That is because for McDowell, having experience of an objective world involves having awareness of the world. It consists of continually reshaping one's view of the world in response to what one is perceiving and being able to actively take charge of how one responds to that world. This requires active thinking and possession of concepts and deployment of one's conceptual capacities in perception on the perceiver's part. Because conceptual activity is needed to acquire a world view, beings without conceptual capacities cannot experience the world. The perception of nonlinguistic beings is limited to their sensitivity to the environment, which involves the ability to react to opportunities and dangers in the environment, without thereby being able to understand the environment in those kind of terms.<sup>90</sup>

How should we understand this disagreement? In *Origins of Objectivity*, Burge discusses Neo-Kantian views of perception (i.e., views that hold that human perception qualitatively differs from animal/infant perception). He explains that views like this are often inspired by Kant's claim that “thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.”<sup>91</sup> However, according to Burge, many neo-Kantians misinterpret this claim. The misinterpretation supports the neo-Kantian idea that animals without conceptual capacities lack perceptual experience, but according to Burge's interpretation of Kant, Kant does not imply that perception without concepts is impossible:

---

<sup>88</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 122.

<sup>89</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 538.

<sup>90</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 50, 114-115, 122-123; Barry Stroud, “Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought,” in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 84.

<sup>91</sup> Kant, “Critique of Pure Reason,” 1070, B75.

There is textual evidence that Kant means by 'blindness' not lack of perception, but lack of self-conscious understanding. Kant's remark occurs in the explanation of conditions for cognition (Erkenntnis). 'Cognition' is a technical term. A cognition is an objective conscious representation whose (actual) objective validity can in principle be established through argument, by the individual with the cognition. Cognition requires an ability to argue something about a representation. Kant's dictum attributes blindness to intuitions relative to obtaining cognition, in this conditioning sense.<sup>92</sup>

Burge thinks that Kant lists the enabling conditions for the ability to self-consciously justify one's representations of a supposedly mind-independent world, rather than the conditions for simply representing the external world. So, Kant's remark does not mean that it is impossible to see the external world without concepts, it only says that it is impossible to consciously reflect on it and justify one's judgements about it without concepts. Moreover, according to Burge, Kant makes no claims about whether nonlinguistic animals, who most probably do not possess concepts of representations, can represent mind-independent entities.<sup>93</sup>

However, I do not think McDowell misinterprets Kant's claims in the way some Neo-Kantians do according to Burge. McDowell would agree that Kant is concerned with self-conscious understanding rather than with objective representation. However, for McDowell, unlike for Burge, self-conscious understanding is a requirement for being able to have experiences of the objective world. In *Mind and World*, McDowell explains how experience of objective reality involves self-conscious understanding by the perceiver:

The objective world is present only to a self-conscious subject, a subject who can ascribe experiences to herself; it is only in the context of a subject's ability to ascribe experiences to herself that experiences can constitute awareness of the world. [...] It is the spontaneity of the understanding, the power of conceptual thinking, that brings both the world and the self into view. Creatures without conceptual capacities lack self-consciousness and – this is part of the same package – experience of objective reality.<sup>94</sup>

Since McDowell does not seem to misinterpret Kant's claim in the way Burge suggests many Neo-Kantians do, Burge's explanation cannot help us to understand why Burge and McDowell hold such diverging views on animal/infant perception. In what follows, I propose a different way to understand the disagreement.

### 3.1.1.2 Terminological Dispute

This brings me to the first stage of my three-stage argument: I claim that McDowell's and Burge's disagreement about the difference between human perception and animal/infant perception results from a terminological dispute. As I explained, McDowell defines 'perceptual experience' as awareness of the world. As we have seen, this awareness requires self-conscious reflection. In contrast to McDowell, who is concerned with the ability to self-consciously reflect on representations of a mind-independent world

---

<sup>92</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 155-156.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 114.

(which is a requirement for having experience), Burge only focusses on objective representation. In his book *Origins of Objectivity*, Burge searches for the constitutive conditions for empirical objectivity. For him, very different from McDowell, perception is characterized by capacities to represent objectively, in which *objectivity* is understood as a value for mental representation, namely “to represent some of the basic mind-independent features of the environment veridically, as they are.”<sup>95</sup>

Next, I show how this terminological dispute is one of the reasons philosophers talk past one another in the debate on nonconceptual content.

### 3.1.1.3 Empirical Science on Human and Animal/Infant Perception

As I mentioned before, Burge believes empirical findings show that we share objective representation through perception with many other animals. Consider the following passage from *Origins of Objectivity*:

Perception and perceptual grouping of entities in the physical environment is a primitive, autonomous capacity. A wide range of animals have objective representation through perception. Probably all mammals, perhaps all birds, many fish and reptiles, and some insects perceive physical particulars in the environment as having specific physical attributes. Their perceptions attribute spatial position and spatial relations, shape, motion, texture, color. These animals represent objectively in the sense that they represent mind-independent or constitutively non-perspectival physical particulars as having ordinary physical attributes that these particulars in fact instantiate. The perceptual states of these animals can be veridical or non-veridical about such a subject matter. Such capacities in perception do not depend on supplementation by other representational capacities.<sup>96</sup>

For Burge, empirical findings suggesting that there are continuities between the perception of humans and animals/infants support the idea that there is no qualitative difference in the perception of beings with and without conceptual capacities. However, as we have seen, McDowell does not agree with Burge. Why are these empirical findings insufficient to convince McDowell otherwise?

This brings me to the second stage of my argument: I argue that, as a result of their terminological disagreement, the empirical findings that support Burge's view are insufficient to show that McDowell's position fails. To do so, I explain that Burge believes that perception depends on capacities for objectification. Hereafter I explain that, if empirical findings suggest that animals have such capacities, Burge can use these findings as support for the idea that there are continuities between human and animal/infant perception. McDowell, on the other hand, would perhaps agree that animals indeed have these capacities, but he would deny that these capacities are sufficient for having experience.

In the field of perceptual psychology, *sensation* is distinguished from *perception*. ‘Sensation’ can be defined as “the ability to detect a stimulus, and perhaps, to turn that detection into a private

---

<sup>95</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 3-4, 12.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

experience,” whereas ‘perception’ is defined as “the act of giving meaning to a detected sensation.”<sup>97</sup> According to Burge, philosophy has failed to distinguish genuine perception from mere sensory registration or information. An example of a consequence of this failure is that representational aspects of the mind are conceived to be “assimilated to high-level capacities, which include scientific reasoning, self-consciousness, reflection, rule-following, linguistic expression of thought, and the like.”<sup>98</sup> Unlike most philosophical systems, which distinguish between sensory registration and propositional thought only, Burge, informed by the empirical sciences, proposes a threefold distinction between sensory discrimination, perception and propositional thought.<sup>99</sup>

According to Burge, perceptual representation can be distinguished from mere sensory registration (or sensation) by capacities for *objectification*. Burge defines ‘objectification’ as “the formation of a representational state that represents the physical environment, beyond the individual’s local, idiosyncratic, or subjective features.”<sup>100</sup> Perception starts with a perceiver registering proximal stimulations from its environment. Burge explains that “if a perceptual system is to form accurate representations as of the environment from such registration, it must operate through processes that highlight those aspects of the registration that tend to be signs of specific attributes in the environment.”<sup>101</sup> These processes are processes of objectification and they are unconscious. According to Burge, the processes result in *objectivity* (in a different sense than the *objectivity* mentioned above). Here, objectivity must be understood as “the product of separating what occurs on an individual’s sensory surfaces from the significance of those stimulations for specific attributes and particulars in the broader environment.”<sup>102</sup>

Burge explains that objectification is realized by exercises of *perceptual constancies*. Occurrences of perceptual constancies are capacities for representing properties or objects as the same whilst proximal stimulations can vary. For example, consider a subject perceiving color. The mere registration of the light arrays on the retina involves no constancies: the proximal light arrays are not sufficient to discriminate among different possible causes in the environment. This does not yet amount to perception; perceptual processes allow us to perceive a color as the same color.<sup>103</sup>

Now that I have explained which capacities perception requires according to Burge, the question is whether the empirical sciences show that nonhuman animals have these capacities as well as humans. It is widely accepted in empirical science that we share our capacity to represent a color as the same under different conditions, called *color constancy*, with many animals. Moreover, other perceptual

---

<sup>97</sup> Jeremy Wolfe, Keith R. Kluender, Dennis M. Levi, Linda M. Bartoshuk, Rachel S. Herz, Roberta L. Klatzky, Susan J. Lederman, and Daniel M. Merfeld, *Sensation & Perception*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 2015), 3.

<sup>98</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 432.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 430-431.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 400.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 408; Burge, “Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology,” 10.



constancies, among which *size*, *shape*, and *distance constancies*, occur in the perceptual systems of animals as well.<sup>104</sup> Because objectification is realized by exercises of perceptual constancies, which humans and many non-human animals share according to the sciences, and perceptual representation depends on processes of objectification, and in turn, perception is characterized by capacities to represent objectively, Burge's idea that there are continuities between human and animal/infant perception is supported by empirical findings.<sup>105</sup> And for Burge, processes of objectification provide a perceiver with a perceptual model of the world:

Specification of mind-independent and constitutively non-perspectival physical entities is separated out from the individual's sensory registration—the functioning state that encodes proximal sensory information. Perceptual states are products of such systematic separation and privileging processes. The immediate effects of proximal stimulations are processed to provide a perceptual model of the world, as distinct from mere registration—from mere functioning statistically correlated, causally based encodings—of individuals' surface stimulations.<sup>106</sup>

The idea that objective representation through perception provides a perceiver with a perceptual model of the world is probably enough for Burge to assume, in McDowell's words, "that mere animals already enjoy perceptual experience in which the world strikes them as being a certain way."<sup>107</sup>

However, although McDowell does not deny that non-human animals have the capacities described by Burge, experience as conceived by McDowell depends on more than capacities for objectification: it also requires conceptual capacities. In *Mind and World*, McDowell explains how this idea relates to explanations of perception from cognitive science:

I am rejecting a picture of a mere animal's perceptual sensitivity to its environment: a picture in which the senses yield content that is less than conceptual but already such as to represent the world. What I am rejecting is a picture of what perceptual states and occurrences are *for an animal*. I have said nothing about how an animal's *perceptual machinery* works. And it is hard to see how those questions could be addressed without exploiting an idea of content that represents the world but cannot be conceptual in the demanding sense I have been using, so no animal's perceptual machinery (not even ours) possesses the spontaneity of understanding. I do not mean to be objecting to anything in cognitive science.<sup>108</sup>

Although McDowell does not object to anything in cognitive science, he would not agree that empirical science supports the idea that non-human animals and infants have the same kind of 'experiences'. Therefore, the empirical findings that Burge believes endorse his position are insufficient to refute McDowell's position. If 'experience' is defined as awareness of the world, and if such awareness

---

<sup>104</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 409-410.

<sup>105</sup> *Comment*: Note that not all animals have capacities for objectification. For example, Burge describes that there is no objectification in the earthworm's visual system: "In earthworms, light sensors are scattered over the worm's body. There is sensitivity to light and dark and to the direction of the light, depending on where on the body the light strikes. There is, however, no capacity to register even a non-representational image—a pattern of stimulus registration that correlates with a pattern of light intensities." Source: Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 422.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>107</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 122.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

requires conceptual capacities and self-consciousness, empirical science must show that animals have conceptual capacities and self-consciousness to refute McDowell's idea that human perception differs from animal/infant perception. However, this is hard to argue for, because McDowell's assumption that only beings with conceptual capacities can have self-consciousness does not conflict with what is known from the empirical sciences.

For instance, according to linguist Ray Jackendoff and philosopher Bermúdez, whose philosophy is informed by the cognitive sciences, conscious thought requires linguistic abilities. The reason is that with language comes the "the ability to convert thoughts into communicable form by linking them to pronunciation."<sup>109</sup> On Jackendoff's view, to be aware of the contents of our thoughts, we need to attach "phonological 'handles'" to our thoughts (i.e., turn our thoughts into words). So the ability to turn our thoughts into communicable form by linking them to pronunciation enables us to be conscious of our thoughts.<sup>110</sup> In *Thinking without Words*, Bermúdez makes a similar point. He argues that reflective thinking, thinking about thinking, requires language. The capacity for reflective thought requires that one be able to hold a thought in mind, for reflective thought requires that thoughts have to be able to feature in further thoughts. For thoughts to be able to feature in further thoughts they have to be inferentially related to further thoughts and be available as the object of further thoughts. For that to be possible, thought has to have the right vehicle; it has to have the right structure. And, according to Bermúdez, the right vehicle can only be a linguistic one.<sup>111</sup> Since self-consciousness is a form of consciousness, consciousness is a requirement for it.<sup>112</sup> And if language is a necessary condition for consciousness, and if we accept that self-consciousness is a necessary condition for experience, nonlinguistic beings (which for McDowell are beings without conceptual capacities) cannot have experience.

I conclude that it is difficult to refute McDowell's position by empirical findings that show that there are continuities between human perception and animal/infant perception. Although philosophers who already are inclined to nonconceptualism will be even more convinced of their position by empirical studies that find many similarities in the perceptions of beings with conceptual capacities and beings without conceptual capacities, those who tend to favor McDowell's conceptualism will not: if experience is by definition only to be had by beings with conceptual capacities, and if humans are the only beings with conceptual capacities (of which we now know of anyway), the fact that the same empirical scientific explanations can be given for human perception and the perception of nonlinguistic animals will not change any conceptualist's mind.

---

<sup>109</sup> Ray Jackendoff, *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 109.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91, 109.

<sup>111</sup> Bermúdez, *Thinking without Words*, 158-164.

<sup>112</sup> Joel Smith, "Self-Consciousness," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/self-consciousness/> (accessed on 17-05-2019).

### 3.1.1.4 Data Structures for Mental Representation

In this final stage of my argument I argue that, even though empirical science cannot directly refute McDowell's idea that only beings with conceptual capacities can have experience (conceived of as awareness of the world), explanations from empirical science might undermine some of McDowell's underlying assumptions. In *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*, Jackendoff describes explanations of cognition from the field of linguistics that go against two assumptions of McDowell: the idea that beliefs have conceptual structure and the idea that only linguistic beings can engage in conceptual thinking.

As I explained in chapter 1, conceptualism is based on the idea that the relationship between experiences and concepts must be similar to the relationship between beliefs or judgements and concepts if experiences are to justify perceptual beliefs and judgements. However, Jackendoff does not agree with McDowell's idea that beliefs, or thoughts, always have propositional or conceptual structure. On Jackendoff's view, there are two complementary kinds of data structures (and perhaps more) used for different kinds of mental representation. First, there is *conceptual structure*, which is the structure that is among other things responsible for processes of categorization and individuation. Second, there is *spatial structure*, which is the structure that encodes every thought one has about the size, shape and position of objects. According to Jackendoff, some thoughts only have conceptual structure, others only spatial structure, but the two structures can also be linked to each other. Moreover, Jackendoff thinks cognitions with conceptual structure are not unique to human beings. Jackendoff claims that human infants and intelligent animals such as apes have concepts and thoughts without having language. And he argues that primates also have thoughts with conceptual structure at times. For example, monkeys and apes recognize all kinds of social relations (e.g., X is a friend of Y, X is dominant to Y, etc.) which cannot be captured in a spatial structure.<sup>113</sup> So, Jackendoff disagrees with McDowell's assumption that only linguistic beings can engage in conceptual thinking.

However, again, although I take these explanations to be additional reasons to adhere to nonconceptualism if one already favors the position, I doubt that they change McDowell's mind. First, McDowell would probably not recognize thoughts solely involving spatial structures as thoughts at all. For McDowell, thinking is characterized by spontaneity, and if thoughts were to lack conceptual structure, we would lack the freedom essential to thinking. McDowell would not claim that conceptual structure is necessarily unique to human beings. If irrefutable proof of nonlinguistic beings having conceptual capacities would be available, McDowell would probably drop the explanation that the education necessary to engage in conceptual capacities only happens in language-using communities.

To conclude, McDowell's view on human perception and animal/infant perception is not supported by empirical science, but can also not directly be refuted by it. Because McDowell does not accept the jargon accepted in cognitive science, his view on the difference between human perception

---

<sup>113</sup> Jackendoff, *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*, 70-71, 122-124, 127.

and animal/infant perception does not seem to be evaluable on empirical scientific grounds. In the next subsection, I assess whether other aspects of McDowell's account of perception are in conflict with what is known from the empirical sciences.

### 3.1.2 Nonveridical Perceptions

Closely related to the discussion on nonconceptual content is the heated debate on the difference between veridical and nonveridical perceptual experiences. In the existing literature, doubts have been expressed about whether McDowell's account of perception and perceptual knowledge, which encompasses disjunctivism and epistemological externalism, conflicts with empirical science. In what follows, I first explain what disjunctivism entails before I assess whether these doubts are justified. The assessment consists of two steps. First, I examine, in light of McDowell's dismissal of causal naturalistic explanations of perception, McDowell's response to skeptic worries about the possibility of gaining knowledge of the external world through perception. Second, I examine Burge's objection that disjunctivism, because it rejects a central principle of contemporary perceptual psychology, is incompatible with what is known from the empirical sciences.

#### 3.1.2.1 Disjunctivism and the Common Factor Conception of Experience

Perceptual experiences can be grouped into three different categories: veridical perceptions, illusions, and hallucinations. Veridical perceptions are cases in which a subject perceives an object in the environment as it is. Illusions are cases in which a subject perceives an object in the environment, but not as it really is. Hallucinations are cases in which a subject thinks it has seen an object, but fails to genuinely perceive any object in the environment.<sup>114</sup> Despite their differences, hallucinations or illusions can be indistinguishable from cases of veridical perception for the experiencing subject. The *highest common factor conception of experience* states that the similarity of a subject's experience of a veridical to an illusory perception can be explained by a common element in both: what these perceptual experiences have in common is an underlying mental state or event.<sup>115</sup>

In *Disjunctivism*, Matthew Soteriou describes the argument that motivates the idea that veridical perceptions and hallucinations have a psychological element in common:

Consider a case in which a subject, S, visually perceives in her environment a mind-independent material object, O. The obtaining of that state of affairs depends on the occurrence of some psychological effect, E, that O has on S. In particular, S doesn't begin to perceive O until O has produced in S some appropriate

---

<sup>114</sup> Matthew Soteriou, *Disjunctivism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1.

<sup>115</sup> Tim Thornton, *John McDowell* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 246; Fish, *Philosophy of Perception*, 1.

*Comment:* The common factor conception of experience is endorsed by sense-datum theorists. Sense-datum theorists interpret the common factor as an "experience involving an awareness of sense-data." There are other theories that accept the highest common factor conception of experience as well. For example, adverbial theories, belief acquisition theories and intentional theories. For more information see Paul Coates, "Sense-Data," in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ISSN 2161-0002), <https://www.iep.utm.edu/sense-da/> (accessed on 13-06-2019); Fish, *Philosophy of Perception*, 33-85.

psychological effect, E. In the causal chain of events leading to E we can mark distinctions between the more proximate causes of E, and the more distal causes of E. Let 'D' denote a distal cause that involves light being reflected by O, and let 'P' denote the more proximate cause of S's optic nerves being suitably stimulated. Let 'T' denote S's total physical and psychological condition immediately prior to her perception of O.

1 When S perceives O, the proximate cause P of psychological effect E on S is preceded by, and caused by, the distal cause D. But that is not the only way in which an event of kind P can occur. An event of kind P can in principle occur in the absence of O, and in the absence of any mind-independent material objects that are qualitatively similar to O (i.e. in the absence of objects that could be candidate objects of perception for S when she is having an experience subjectively indistinguishable from a genuine perception of O).

2 Condition T can also, in principle, obtain in the absence of O and in the absence of mind-independent material objects that are qualitatively similar to O. Indeed, we can envisage a situation in which T obtains and P occurs even though no suitable mind-independent O-like material object is present. In any such situation, the occurrence of P won't be causally sufficient for S to be perceptually aware of a mind-independent material object in her environment.

3 If T obtains and O is absent (and there are no other suitable O-like mind-independent material objects in S's environment to serve as candidate objects of perceptual awareness), then proximate cause P is sufficient to produce in S a perceptual event/state of the kind that occurs when one has a hallucination that is subjectively indistinguishable from a genuine perception of an O.<sup>116</sup>

4 The presence of O (and the fact that O is involved in an event D that is a distal cause of P) does not prevent the proximate cause P from producing the same kind of effect – i.e. the effect of producing in S a perceptual event/state of the kind that occurs when one has a hallucination that is subjectively indistinguishable from a genuine perception of an O.

5 Therefore, when S has a genuine perception of an O, this involves the occurrence/obtaining of a perceptual event/state of the kind that occurs when one has a hallucination that is subjectively indistinguishable from a genuine perception of an O.<sup>117</sup>

The argument makes some empirical assumptions. The third premise is based on the intuitive assumption that genuine perceptions and hallucinations can be indistinguishable for the experiencing subject. The fourth premise is based on the assumption that “the absence of a distal cause involving O isn't a background causal condition that's required for P to have the effect of producing in S a perceptual event/state of the same kind,” which is supported by a central principle from perceptual psychology that holds that different distal conditions can yield the same type of perceptual state.<sup>118</sup>

However, not all agree with this explanation of the similarity between cases of veridical and nonveridical perception. *Disjunctivism* is the position of those who deny that veridical and nonveridical perceptions have the same kind of experience in common; it is the view that “there is never any specific perceptual-state kind in common between a perception of one object and a perception of another object (even if the objects are not discriminable to the perceiver through the perception), or between a perception of an object and a perceptual referential illusion that is contextually indiscriminable to the perceiver from the successful perception.”<sup>119</sup>

McDowell is a disjunctivist. He rejects the highest common factor conception. According to him, an experience of such-and-such being the case can either be a mere appearance or a fact making

---

<sup>116</sup> Soteriou, *Disjunctivism*, 159.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-160.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>119</sup> Burge, “Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology,” 2.

itself perceptually manifest.<sup>120</sup> McDowell thinks that when perception goes well, experience gives direct access to facts about the world; if perception does not go well, experience is only an appearance. Either way, there is no mental element common to cases of veridical perception and cases of mere appearance.<sup>121</sup> The idea that there must be such a common element is based on a misconception: according to McDowell, there does not have to be a shared element that explains why an experience seems the same in veridical and nonveridical cases.<sup>122</sup>

### **3.1.2.2 Distinction Between Hallucinations and Genuine Perceptions**

Not only do disjunctivists and advocates of the highest common factor conception of experience disagree about the element veridical perception and hallucination have in common, they also disagree on how to respond to skepticism, particularly, to the question of how we can know whether a particular perception is veridical or deceptive. I now argue that McDowell's dismissal of causal naturalistic explanations of perception, leaves aspects of his account mysterious and unsatisfactory.

To better understand McDowell's position, I first explain the skeptic line of reasoning that McDowell responds to. If we accept that hallucinations are subjectively indistinguishable from successful perceptions, it is tempting to assume that the difference is something external to the way things appear to the experiencing subject. However, for McDowell, who assumes that knowledge is a standing in the space of reasons, such a view is unacceptable. Because external matters cannot make a difference to a subject's epistemic standing in the space of reasons, it would follow that the epistemic warrant for making perceptual judgements in veridical cases is no better than in nonveridical cases. This can lead to skepticism about the possibility of acquiring knowledge about the external world. If we cannot distinguish veridical perceptions from deceptive ones, how can we ever know that what we perceive is a genuine glimpse of the world? McDowell, however, argues that this worry is ill-founded: it should follow from his view that the skeptic's worries are not pressing and do not need solving. In what follows, I describe the steps involved in McDowell's argument.

To start with, McDowell denies that the epistemic warrant for making perceptual judgements in veridical cases is no better than in nonveridical cases. According to McDowell, there is epistemic asymmetry between genuine perceptions and hallucinations.

Suppose we say – not all unnaturally – that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of the experience in the deceptive cases is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, the appearance that is presented to one in those cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the perceiver.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> De Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, 162; Thornton, *John McDowell*, 245.

<sup>121</sup> Thornton, *John McDowell*, 173.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>123</sup> John McDowell, quoted in De Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, 160.

Soteriou provides a concise summary of McDowell's commitments which explain why hallucinations and genuine perceptions provide different epistemic warrants:

- (a) there is a significant epistemic asymmetry between the case in which you successfully perceive your environment and the case in which you have a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination;
- (b) this epistemic asymmetry is to be explained, at least in part, by appeal to an asymmetry in the epistemic grounds for judgement that you have access to in each case; and
- (c) when all goes well and you successfully perceive your environment, you have access to *conclusive* grounds for judgements about your environment, i.e. epistemic grounds for judgement that don't leave open the possibility that those judgements are false.<sup>124</sup>

So, McDowell thinks that the openness to the world that is involved in experience provides epistemic warrant for one's belief that things are the way as they appear to be. That appearances can mislead one into supposing that things are thus and so when they are not, does not matter much to McDowell. The important thing is that "when one is not misled, one takes in how things are."<sup>125</sup> So, the possibility of being misled does not stand in the way of having direct access to the world in cases of veridical perception. Thereby, McDowell rejects the idea that the epistemic warrants provided by veridical and nonveridical perceptions are the same.

Moreover, this idea of epistemic asymmetry provides McDowell with a way of going against the assumption that the difference between veridical and nonveridical perceptions is something external to the way things appear to a subject: "On McDowell's view, when a fact is made perceptually manifest to one, the obtaining of the fact is not 'blankly external to one's subjectivity'. So the obtaining of the fact can contribute to one's epistemic standing."<sup>126</sup> However, as I argue shortly, if the subject cannot distinguish veridical perceptions from hallucinations, this epistemic standing does not amount to much.

But first let me explain why McDowell thinks his ideas show that the skeptic's worries are not pressing and do not need solving. According to McDowell, skeptic worries place "an 'interface' between the experiencing subject and reality – all the subject can experience are certain kinds of appearance, and those appearances may or may not be true to the facts."<sup>127</sup> They endorse what McDowell calls a *side-ways on picture*, a picture that places the conceptual system and the world opposite each other. This picture "places the world outside a boundary around the system we have supposedly come to understand."<sup>128</sup> Such pictures result from the Cartesian separation of mind and world, McDowell explains. The Cartesian view of the mind holds that mental states occupy an inner realm that is entirely independent of the outside world. It assumes that one cannot be in doubt about what lies in this inner realm. According to McDowell, in accounts inspired by the Cartesian separation of mind and world,

---

<sup>124</sup> Soteriou, *Disjunctivism*, 119.

<sup>125</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 9.

<sup>126</sup> Matthew Soteriou, "The Disjunctive Theory of Perception," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/perception-disjunctive/> (accessed on 06-05-2019).

<sup>127</sup> De Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, 161.

<sup>128</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 35.

experience is understood as “an internal mental entity to be injected with representational bearing on the world,” which results in a gap between experience and the world. This is not the case if experience is understood as openness to the world; “having an experience is just having the world in view. It is not a freestanding inner state that copies or represents that world.”<sup>129</sup> Contrary to this view, McDowell’s conception of experience as openness to the world is the denial that sensations form such an interface and the rejection of a side-ways on picture. On McDowell’s view, “mental states are essentially relational and thus not independent of the outer world.”<sup>130</sup> As a result, the skeptic worries resulting from the side-ways on picture, can simply be dismissed.

Furthermore, McDowell explains that skepticism is induced by the idea that our experience may be fallible. However, for McDowell, a subject has infallible knowledge about how things appear to him in experience. It is only the appearing itself that can be either a case of successful or deceptive perception:

Having something perceptually present to one is having an indefeasible warrant for believing that things are a certain way, and it is part of having such a warrant that one is in a position to know that that is one’s position. The capacity to get into such positions is fallible. It does not follow that that cannot really be what it is a capacity to do.<sup>131</sup>

So, it is not our experiences themselves that are fallible, but our perceptual capacities that not always provide us with veridical perceptions. So, against the skeptical conclusion, McDowell can conclude that in cases of veridical experience, there is no doubt that we acquire knowledge of the world.<sup>132</sup> McDowell thinks that his view hereby shows that skeptical questions regarding the possibility of empirical knowledge are not pressing.

However, I argue this answer is insufficient to resolve the skeptic’s worries. As I briefly mentioned earlier, it seems like a subject’s epistemic standing when a fact is made perceptually manifest to one does not amount to much if the subject cannot distinguish veridical perceptions from hallucinations. And McDowell acknowledges that the capacity to get into the position of knowing that one has an indefeasible warrant for believing that things are a certain way is fallible. So, as long as McDowell has not solved the problem of how we can ever distinguish between perceptions involving a fact making itself manifest and perceptions that are a mere appearance, it seems that the skeptic still has reason to worry.

So, how could a subject know that *p* is the case rather than having it appear that *p* is the case? McDowell’s opponents can appeal to causal relations in the environment to explain when perception is successful.<sup>133</sup> Such an appeal is not available to McDowell for two reasons: he rejects the idea that causal

---

<sup>129</sup> Thornton, *John McDowell*, 174-175.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 5; De Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, 161.

<sup>131</sup> John McDowell, “Tyler Burge on Disjunctivism,” *Philosophical Explorations* 13, no. 3 (2010): 246.

<sup>132</sup> Soteriou, “The Disjunctive Theory of Perception.”

<sup>133</sup> Thornton, *John McDowell*, 171.



naturalistic explanations of perception can capture the intelligibility of the space of reasons, and even if he would accept them, he believes that causal naturalistic explanations of perception are insufficient to explain how we acquire knowledge about the world through perception.

First, unlike his opponents, McDowell's philosophical position requires him to reject causal naturalistic explanations of perception. McDowell argues that the terms in which we must understand (the relationship between) perception and judgement have their place in the space of reasons. The structure of the space of reasons is *sui generis*, meaning that this space has a kind of intelligibility that cannot be expressed in other terms. In his book on McDowell's philosophy, Tim Thornton explains this as follows: according to McDowell, "there is no prospect of a fruitful analysis that starts outside a region of conceptual judgement and attempts, for example, to ground those judgements using a description of the world couched in independent concepts. To put the point less metaphorically, McDowell rejects any form of philosophical analysis that consists of providing a *reduction* of one set of concepts into another that is supposedly less philosophically perplexing."<sup>134</sup> Thus, talk of spontaneity cannot be reduced to a natural scientific language. Therefore, in accounts on the nature of perception, no causal naturalistic explanations can be given.<sup>135</sup>

Second, as is clear by now, McDowell assumes that knowledge depends on reasons. This leads him to reject the idea that causal connections are sufficient to ground beliefs. If experiences are not conceived of as conceptualized, the presence of a particular object in the environment in combination with it having appear to a subject that that object is present, is insufficient for that person to hold the belief that the object in question is there. The belief cannot be based on a sensation in this way, according to McDowell. Although the method would be reliable most of the time, the experience would be blind in the sense that it is not available to spontaneity and therefore cannot be a reason for a belief. Thus, McDowell thinks that causal explanations cannot explain how we acquire knowledge about the world through perception.<sup>136</sup> So, to conclude, McDowell is unable to explain how a subject can know whether his perception is veridical by appealing to causal connections.

However, because of his view of how we acquire knowledge of the external world through perception, I doubt that McDowell is able to provide us with a different answer to the question of how a subject can know whether a particular perception that things are thus-and-so is veridical or illusory. McDowell's idea that perceptual experience involves openness to the world, which means that "experiences are not internal states of a subject," commits him to epistemological externalism.<sup>137</sup> This epistemological externalism is unlike most forms of externalism. *Internalism* is typically characterized as the position of those who hold that justification depends solely on a subject's internal states or reasons, whereas *externalism* is typically characterized as the position of those who hold that justification is not

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>135</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, xx.

<sup>136</sup> Stroud, "Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought," 84.

<sup>137</sup> Thornton, *John McDowell*, 170.

solely determined by factors internal to a subject.<sup>138</sup> Most externalist accounts do away with the notion of reasons. McDowell, however, argues that perceptual knowledge requires that the world does the subject a favor by, in the case of veridical perception, appearing to a subject as it really is, whilst also arguing that knowledge depends on reasons.<sup>139</sup>

Because McDowell rejects the idea that causal naturalistic explanations can capture the intelligibility of the space of reasons, a subject cannot appeal to scientific causal explanations of perception as a reason for endorsing perception as a reliable method for arriving at true beliefs. As we have seen, McDowell's conception of experience as openness to the world guarantees that empirical knowledge is possible (because sometimes perceptions provide us with genuine glimpses of the world). However, openness to the world does not seem to be a sufficient reason for believing that a particular perception is veridical, because openness only guarantees that a particular perception is either veridical or a mere appearance. According to McDowell, whether our perception is veridical is determined by a favor from the world. But how can a subject know whether the world is doing her a favor? If a subject wonders if a particular perception provides knowledge of the external world, that subject could rely on the method of trusting that the world does him a favor. But what reason is there to rely on depending on a favor from the world as a reliable method, that is accessible for the subject herself, other than accepting scientific explanations proving that our perceptions are usually veridical?<sup>140</sup> Because McDowell cannot accept such explanations, it is difficult to imagine a satisfactory response from him. In the end, McDowell's answer to the skeptic's worries remains unsatisfactory.

However, that McDowell's disjunctivist account of perception does not include causal naturalistic explanations of perception does not yet imply that it is incompatible with the empirical sciences. In the next section, I investigate whether that is the case.

### 3.1.2.3 Rejection of the Proximality Principle

After having briefly discussed what McDowell's disjunctivism entails, I now assess whether McDowell's rejection of the highest common factor conception of experience conflicts with the empirical sciences, as Burge suggests.<sup>141</sup> According to Burge, what makes McDowell's disjunctivism incompatible with empirical science is that McDowell's disjunctivism conflicts with the *proximality*

---

<sup>138</sup> Ted Poston, "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology," in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ISSN 2161-0002), <https://www.iep.utm.edu/int-ext/> (accessed on 13-06-2019).

<sup>139</sup> Thornton, *John McDowell*, 177.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 177, 189, 192.

<sup>141</sup> *Comment*: In my Bachelor's Thesis, I argued that McDowell's disjunctivism is irreconcilable with certain central principles in perceptual psychology. To do so, I followed Burge's objections to McDowell's disjunctivism to show that McDowell's account of perception is incompatible with empirical scientific knowledge. Because of the knowledge I gained through this thesis about the complication that makes philosophers from both sides in the debate on nonconceptual content talk past one another, I want to reevaluate the objection. See, Loren Bremmers, *A Comparison of Davidson's and McDowell's Accounts of Perceptual Beliefs*, Honours Bachelor's Thesis (2017), <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/353882> (accessed on 01-05-2019), 27-29.

*principle*, whilst contemporary perceptual psychology is committed to it.<sup>142</sup> According to the proximity principle, a common factor exists between veridical perceptions, hallucinations, and illusions. The principle specifies how the formation of perceptual states causally depends on solely proximal and internal input into the perceptual system and antecedent psychological conditions; it holds that “on any given occasion, given the total antecedent psychological state of the individual and system, the total proximal input together with internal input into the system suffices to produce a given type of perceptual state, assuming no malfunction or interference.”<sup>143</sup> Burge notes that the same type of proximal stimulation can be produced by different environmental distal conditions, so different distal conditions can yield the same type of perceptual state. So the same type of perceptual state can be a veridical perception, hallucination or illusion. The science of perceptual psychology assumes that whether a given perceptual state is veridical or not depends on the distal conditions alone.<sup>144</sup>

Now the problem with McDowell's disjunctivism is as follows according to Burge: “The science of perceptual psychology explains individuals' perceivings in these cases as involving the same specific kind of perceptual state. Differences among the cases reside in occurrent aspects of these perceptual kinds. The science differentiates between the cases, and helps explain the differences. But the scientific principles that describe the laws into which individuals' perceptual states enter focus on a common factor, the ability-general kind. Disjunctivism denies such a common factor.”<sup>145</sup> So, McDowell's account is clearly not compatible with explanations from empirical science, according to Burge.

But is Burge's conclusion justified? Perhaps the objection is yet another example of philosophers talking past each other. I believe that we can question whether McDowell really denies that the same type of perceptual state can be a veridical perception, hallucination or illusion. Consider the following point made by John Campbell in a defense of his own position against Burge's objection that his account is incompatible with vision science. In “Demonstrative Reference, the Relational View of Experience, and the Proximity Principle,” Campbell explains that Burge states there is a “sameness of perceptual type” between veridical and deceptive cases “at the level of brain biology and information-processing.”<sup>146</sup> However, those who deny that there is a sameness of perceptual type might be talking about the level of conscious experience only. They can acknowledge that there are “underlying proximal similarities between seeing and hallucinating, at the level of brain biology and visual information-

---

<sup>142</sup> *Comment*: Burge explains that the principle “is implicit in causal explanation of the perceptual states that are the principal *explananda* of all reasonably well-developed empirical perceptual theories.” Source: Burge, “Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology,” 22.

<sup>143</sup> Burge, “Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology,” 22.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>145</sup> Burge, “Disjunctivism Again,” 43.

<sup>146</sup> John Campbell, “Demonstrative Reference, the Relational View of Experience, and the Proximity Principle,” in *New Essays on Singular Thought*, ed. Robin Jeshion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199567881.003.0007> (accessed on 14-06-2019).

processing,” thereby not going against the proximity principle, whilst maintaining that there is a distinction between seeings and hallucinations at the level of the conscious experience.<sup>147</sup>

Could a similar explanation be available for McDowell? According to McDowell, there is no common element in the experiential content of a veridical perception and a hallucination, but he does not reject that “there is a state type in common between [...] disjuncts,” as he does believe there is a common state type between veridical and deceptive cases, that is, “the state of seeming to stand in a specific intentional relation to an object.”<sup>148</sup> Now, perhaps those states of seeming to stand in a specific intentional relation to an object could involve the same visual information-processing states in the brain in veridical and nonveridical cases. If so, McDowell’s disjunctivism would not be incompatible with the proximity principle.

To conclude, although McDowell’s disjunctivism is not informed nor directly supported by the empirical sciences, it is preliminary to conclude that McDowell’s disjunctivism is incompatible with the proximity principle, a central principle from perceptual psychology. Similar to the way McDowell’s view on the difference between human perception and animal/infant perception does not seem to be evaluable on empirical scientific grounds, McDowell’s disjunctivism might not be refutable by the sciences either. As I mentioned before, McDowell does not mean to be objecting to anything in cognitive science. He believes his philosophy and the cognitive sciences provide very different types of accounts of perception which explain different kind of phenomena. Therefore, these accounts can coexist without conflicting. So, despite Burge’s objection to McDowell’s disjunctivism, I conclude that we cannot (yet) claim that McDowell’s account of perception fails to meet the first condition I proposed. However, as I argued in the previous subsection, there still is a problem with McDowell’s account of perception: his dismissal of causal naturalistic explanations of perception leaves aspects of his account mysterious and unsatisfactory.

### **3.2 Conceptualism on Features of the Relationship between Concepts and Perceptual Experiences**

My second condition requires philosophers of perception to reflect on the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences including justification. Although conceptualism can explain how our perceptual experiences can ground perceptual beliefs and judgements, I argue in this section that conceptualism has problems with accounting for other features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences. I explain that conceptualism owes us an explanation of the grounds on which concepts are drawn into the contents of experience in deceptive cases. I do so by building on an argument given by Crane in the article “The Nonconceptual Content of Experience” and an argument given by Wright in “Nonconceptual Content.”

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> McDowell, “Tyler Burge on Disjunctivism,” 252.

Crane states that accounts of perception need to provide a story of how perceptions and perceptual beliefs are related. The simplest story is to say that perceptions are a kind of belief. However, Crane points out that very often it is not the case that we believe what we see. Consider for example optical illusions such as the Müller-Lyer illusion. The lines with stylized arrows in the image are all the same length, but most of us, even if we believe that the lines are of equal length, see that the line with the arrows going out as longer than the other lines. If we assume that perceptions are beliefs, the result of the Müller-Lyer illusion is problematic: it entails the implausible consequence that perceivers can have contradictory beliefs.<sup>149</sup>

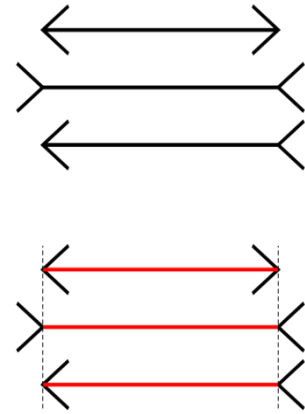


Figure 1. The Müller-Lyer illusion

Can Crane's argument be used to argue against conceptualism? On McDowell's conceptualist view, perceptions are not considered to be a kind of belief. Perceptions, unlike beliefs, are products of receptivity. Because perceptions and beliefs are differentiated, the contradiction problem does not seem to arise here. Conceptualists can argue that, since perceptions are not beliefs, both states, although both conceptual, can have different kinds of contents: the perception has the content that "that *L1* is longer than *L2*" and the belief "that *L1* and *L2* are the same length."<sup>150</sup>

However, although the contradiction problem does not arise for conceptualism, I argue that the Müller-Lyer illusion can be used to show that McDowell's idea of the relation between perceptions and beliefs is problematic too. More specifically, I argue that optical illusions raise a question about the grounds on which conceptual capacities are drawn into the content of experience. According to McDowell, the same conceptual capacities are at work in both perception and belief. Conceptualists must say that in the example of the Müller-Lyer illusion, perceivers represent the two lines as of being of different length by means of the concepts that constitute the content of the perceptual experience. However, it is unclear on what grounds concepts are drawn into the content of perceptual experience in deceptive cases. A similar point is made by Wright in "Nonconceptual Content," in which he raises the following question: "On what grounds are those concepts, rather than others, passively drawn into the content of that visual experience?"<sup>151</sup> In the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion, concepts are drawn into the content of a subject's experience that do not match the actual state of affairs in the world. If we follow McDowell's conceptualism, I do not understand why the 'wrong' concepts would be triggered. McDowell's idea that experience involves openness to the world provides no answer. As Wright explains, "since the actual state of the world is that the lines are of the same length, it looks as though the answer cannot involve an appeal to how the world is."<sup>152</sup>

<sup>149</sup> Crane, "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience," 149-157.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>151</sup> Wright, "Nonconceptual Content."

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

I like to add to this argument that besides optical illusions, hallucinations provide a similar problem for conceptualism. Consider, for example, a case in which someone knows that there is not really a cow in the meadow, but still sees one. In this case, McDowell, again, cannot explain on what grounds the perceptual contents of the subject possess the contents they do by appealing to experience's openness.

So, to conclude, conceptualism has a problem accounting for some features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences. This problem does not occur for nonconceptualism. If conceptual capacities are not involved in experience, there is no problem with the perception having the content "that *L1* is longer than *L2*" whilst the belief has the content "that *L1* and *L2* are the same length."<sup>153</sup>

### **3.3 Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to evaluate to what extent conceptualism meets the two conditions I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception: to repeat, (1) they must be compatible with what is known from the empirical sciences, and (2) they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and experience including justification. First, I examined whether McDowell's view on the difference between human perception and animal/infant perception is compatible with empirical findings. I argued that, although explanations in psychology and linguistics are incompatible with some of McDowell's ideas and underlying assumptions, it is difficult to refute McDowell's position directly because of his specific use of central terms. Second, I argued that, although it remains unclear whether McDowell's disjunctivism rejects the proximity principle, and whether his account is therefore incompatible or not with the science of perceptual psychology, McDowell's dismissal of scientific explanations of perception leaves aspects of his account unsatisfactory. Still, it is preliminary to conclude that McDowell fails to meet the first condition I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception. Hereafter, I turned to the assessment of the extent to which McDowell meets the second condition. I argued that McDowell fails to provide an explanation of the grounds on which concepts are drawn into the contents of perception in illusions and hallucinations. Because McDowell thereby cannot account for some features of the relationship between concepts and perception, I conclude that he fails to meet the second condition. Thereby, McDowell fails to fulfill the established requirements for philosophical accounts of perception.

---

<sup>153</sup> Crane, "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience," 150.

## 4. A Defense of Nonconceptualism

In this chapter, I argue that the prospects of nonconceptualism meeting the two conditions are better than those of conceptualism. To repeat, I set the following two conditions for philosophical accounts of perception: (1) they must be compatible with what is known from the empirical sciences, and (2) they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences, including justification. In the first section of the chapter, I argue that explanations from perceptual psychology and linguistics can be used to support the argument from animal and infant perception. In the second section, I argue that, despite the challenge of explaining how the process of conceptualization works, nonconceptualism is able to provide a satisfactory account of (features of) the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences including justification.

### 4.1 Nonconceptualism and Empirical Science

My first condition requires that philosophical accounts of perception are compatible with what is known from empirical science. In this section, I show how a specific argument that motivates nonconceptualism, the argument from animal and infant perception, can be defended by explanations from the empirical sciences.

As I explained in chapter 1, the argument from animal and infant perception is one of the most important motivations for nonconceptualism. According to nonconceptualists, the argument is supported by empirical findings that suggest that there are many similarities in the experience of, on the one hand, linguistic animals and prelinguistic infants, and on the other hand, humans with conceptual capacities. Consider, for instance, the following explanation of constitutive processes of perception that is widely accepted within the field of perceptual psychology. In *Perception*, a book about the psychology of perception, Randolph Blake and Robert Sekuler state that successful dealings with the environment depend on three processes: *detection*, the process of singling out an object from its surroundings; *discrimination*, the process of distinguishing one object from another object; *identification*, the process of identifying a specific object. Not only human perception depends on these processes. Animals too rely on discrimination, for example to discriminate edible from inedible foods or to discriminate potential mates in a group.<sup>154</sup> This can be seen as evidence for the continuities between human and nonhuman perception and this accords with the empirical scientific explanations of perception discussed in chapter 3.

Although many more explanations in the empirical sciences rely on or support the idea of nonconceptual content in perception, as I concluded in chapter 3, conceptualists will not be convinced by empirical findings suggesting that many similarities exist between human and animal/infant perception (see section 3.1.1). Conceptualists such as McDowell argue that there is a *qualitative*

---

<sup>154</sup> Randolph Blake and Robert Sekuler, *Perception*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 151.

difference between the perceptual experiences of humans and of nonhuman animals and infants, an idea that is neither directly supported nor refuted by the empirical sciences. Because the strategy of refuting conceptualism's view on human versus animal/infant perception by using empirical findings has proven to be unfruitful, I do not want to pursue it any further in this chapter. I, therefore, turn to a second strategy: instead of refuting the conceptualist view on human versus animal/infant perception with empirical findings, I merely show how empirical scientific explanations can be used to defend the nonconceptualist view. I do so by discussing conceptualist Alex Byrne's objection to Peacocke's version of the argument from animal and infant perception and show how nonconceptualists can respond to such an objection by making use of empirical scientific explanations.

In "Phenomenology and Nonconceptual Content," Peacocke presents a short version of the argument from animal and infant perception:

Nonconceptual content has been recruited for many purposes. In my view the most fundamental reason – the one on which other reasons must rely if the conceptualist presses hard – lies in the need to describe correctly the overlap between human perception and that of some of the nonlinguistic animals. While being reluctant to attribute concepts to the lower animals, many of us would also want to insist that the property of (say) representing a flat brown surface as being at a certain distance from one can be common to the perceptions of humans and of lower animals. The overlap of content is not just a matter of analogy, of mere quasi-subjectivity in the animal case. It is literally the same representational property that the two experiences possess, even if the human experience also has richer representational contents in addition. If the lower animals do not have states with conceptual content, but some of their perceptual states have contents in common with human perceptions, it follows that some perceptual representational content is nonconceptual.<sup>155</sup>

Byrne, a defender of conceptualism, doubts that Peacocke's argument is valid. In "Perception and Conceptual Content," Byrne reconstructs Peacocke's argument as follows. Peacocke's first assumption is that humans possess concepts and nonhuman animals do not. Byrne thinks that this premise can be rephrased as follows: humans, unlike nonhuman animals, have beliefs. It follows from this first premise that humans are in states (e.g. beliefs) with conceptual content whereas animals are not. Peacocke's second assumption is that some nonhuman animals' perceptual states have contents in common with human perceptions. From these premises, Peacocke concludes that human perceptual states have nonconceptual content.<sup>156</sup>

According to Byrne, there is tension between Peacocke's two premises. The first premise, that humans possess concepts and thereby have beliefs whereas nonhuman animals do not, emphasizes how cognitively different humans and nonhuman animals are. The second premise, that some of nonhuman animals' perceptual states have contents in common with human perceptions, focusses on a similarity. Now consider a case in which a human and a nonhuman animal look at the same brown surface. Whereas the first premise implies that animals "neither know, think, nor believe that this surface is brown," the

---

<sup>155</sup> Christopher Peacocke, "Phenomenology and Nonconceptual Content," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, no. 3 (2001): 613-614.

<sup>156</sup> Alex Byrne, "Perception and Conceptual Content," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 236-237.



second implies that “the surface can appear to some of them exactly as it appears to some of us.”<sup>157</sup> Then Byrne explains that Peacocke thinks that animals do not have beliefs in the way that humans have, but he does think they can have *proto-beliefs*. Proto-beliefs are states similar to beliefs, but are not constituted by concepts. But if animals have proto-beliefs, why could they not have *proto-perceptions*? If this is the case, there is no reason to assume that the perceptions of humans and animals are so similar after all, Byrne concludes.<sup>158</sup>

I claim, however, that Byrne’s argument is based on a misconception. Using explanations from the field of linguistics, I defend the nonconceptualist position. I argue that, unlike Byrne seems to think, proto-beliefs can be ascribed to humans as well as animals/infants. Therefore, it cannot be used to mark a principled distinction between animal/infant and human thought. Moreover, I believe a similar point can be made with regard to proto-perceptions. Byrne argues that, if animals/infants have proto-beliefs as a result of their lack of concepts, they very possibly also merely have proto-perceptions rather than genuine perceptions, which shows how different human perception and animal/infant perception are. However, matching the way proto-beliefs can be ascribed to humans as well as animals/infants, I believe the empirical sciences support the idea that human perceptions can sometimes be labelled ‘proto-perceptions’ as well.

Before I can give my argument, I first need to clarify what proto-thoughts are supposed to be. In *The Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, Michael Dummett gives a useful characterization of Frege’s ideas on proto-thoughts. Dummett describes how Frege used the notion of proto-thoughts to refer to a kind of thought without conceptual structure:

Frege pointed out, in effect, that we cannot attribute to a dog such a thought as ‘There is only one dog barring my way’, because he does not have the concept ‘one’. He observed, however, that this does not mean that the dog is unable to distinguish between being attacked by one hostile dog and by several. He might well, for example, have adopted a policy of standing his ground on a particular route when there was only one hostile dog about, but of retreating whenever there was more than one, and do what we should find it difficult to describe otherwise than as ‘looking about to make sure that there was only one’. Nevertheless, as Frege remarked, the dog has no “consciousness, however dim, of that common element which we express by the word ‘one’ between the cases, for example, in which he is bitten by one larger dog and in which he chases one cat”; and this blocks us from seriously ascribing to him the thought, ‘There is only one dog there’. He has, we may say, proto-thoughts, which cannot be accurately expressed in language, because any sentence that suggests itself is conceptually too rich for the purpose.<sup>159</sup>

Next, Dummett provides an additional example of proto-thoughts:

A car driver or a canoeist may have rapidly to estimate the speed and direction of oncoming cars or boats and their probable trajectory, consider what avoiding action to take, and so on: it is natural to say that he

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, Bloomsbury Revelations ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 115-116.

is engaged in highly concentrated thought. But the vehicle of such thoughts is certainly not language: it should be said, I think, to consist in visual imagination superimposed on the visually perceived scene.<sup>160</sup>

So, the difference between conceptual thoughts and proto-thoughts is that proto-thoughts lack the structure of verbally expressed thoughts. That is not to say these 'thoughts' are without structure. Whereas conceptual thoughts have conceptual structure, proto-thoughts have a different structure, namely, "spatial images superimposed on spatial perceptions."<sup>161</sup> Dummett argues that they still deserve the name 'proto-thought' because, "while it would be ponderous to speak of truth and falsity in application to them, they are intrinsically connected with the possibility of their being mistaken."<sup>162</sup>

Byrne, mistakenly, assumes that only nonlinguistic animals have proto-thoughts. As a result, his reconstruction of Peacocke's argument is incomplete. Although it is true that humans can be in states with conceptual content whereas animals cannot, not all states humans can be in are conceptual. This point is made by linguist Jackendoff, who claims the following in response to the debate on nonconceptual content:

As far as I understand it, the question is whether there could be such a thing as gconcepts that aren't concepts, or whether there could be parts of concepts that are only gconcepts. Of course there could.<sup>163</sup>

To clarify, the question of whether there can be nonconceptual content is reformulated by Jackendoff to the question of whether there can be 'gconcepts' and 'shmoughts'. These are "concepts and thoughts that aren't attached to words."<sup>164</sup> An example of a gconcept is the gconcept of the sound of a guitar or piano. Most philosophers maintain that by definition, concepts and thoughts are attached to words, but Jackendoff insists that we can simply apply the terms 'concept' and 'thought' to also refer to 'gconcept' and 'shmought'.<sup>165</sup> I think the terms 'proto-concept' and 'proto-thought' could also be used for that purpose. So, if we are set on using this terminology, I believe Jackendoff would have no problem ascribing proto-thoughts to humans. If we accept these explanations from linguistics, we can call into question Byrne's claim that Peacocke's argument emphasizes how cognitively different humans and nonlinguistic beings are.

If we extend this line of thought, we can also make a case for the ascription of proto-perceptions to humans as well as to nonlinguistic beings. In the previous chapter I explained that Jackendoff states that cognition is comprised of two or more complementary kinds of data structures used for different kinds of mental representation: conceptual structure deals with categorizing and identifying, *spatial structure* encodes thoughts about the size, shape and position of objects.<sup>166</sup> As we have seen, experience

---

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Jackendoff, *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*, 71.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 170-71.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 122-124.

conceptualism usually follows from the idea that beliefs and judgements have propositional or conceptual structure, and that perceptions therefore need to have that structure as well if they are to justify them. But, as I argue next, if there is cognition without conceptual structure, as Jackendoff describes, this supports the nonconceptualist idea that the contents of perception are nonconceptual and are conceptualized only once we make judgements or form beliefs about those perceptions.

According to Jackendoff, in the same way as cognition has multiple structures, perception has different modalities as well. A cognition about an object can be informed by different kinds of perceptions. There is for example visual perception, haptic perception and proprioception (which is perception of your own body configuration). All of these perceptions lead to cognitions with spatial structures.<sup>167</sup> Jackendoff explains that in the act of perceiving an object, a spatial structure is generated by the mind. Only after the act of perceiving, the mind links the spatial structure to a conceptual structure. This explanation accords with the nonconceptualist idea that the contents of perception are nonconceptual and are conceptualized when we judge or form beliefs about our perceptual experiences.

To conclude, Jackendoff claims that at least some of the contents of human concepts, thoughts and perceptions lack conceptual structure. If proto-perceptions are conceived of as perceptions without a conceptual structure, similar to how proto-thoughts are conceived of as thoughts without conceptual structure, then the explanations from linguistics just discussed suggest that humans and nonlinguistic beings both have them. Byrne's suggestion that nonlinguistic beings might have proto-perceptions is therefore insufficient to demonstrate that their perceptions are different from human perceptions. I conclude that empirical explanations can refute Byrne's argument that the existence of proto-thoughts and proto-perceptions can be used to mark a principled distinction between the perceptions of humans and nonlinguistic beings. By developing this argument, I have also shown how the nonconceptualist view can be defended by relying on empirical scientific explanations.

## **4.2 Nonconceptualism on Features of the Relationship between Concepts and Perceptual Experiences**

My second condition requires philosophers of perception to reflect on the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences. As explained, the different ways in which beliefs and perceptual experiences seem to relate to concepts is often used as motivation for adhering to nonconceptualism. The challenge that nonconceptualists face is of explaining how the nonconceptual contents of perceptual experiences can ground perceptual beliefs and judgements. In this section, I first give a more in-depth explanation of how the different ways in which beliefs and perceptual experiences relate to concepts motivates nonconceptualism, before I turn to the issue of justification.

---

<sup>167</sup> *Comment:* Note that according to Jackendoff, there is a type of perception that is directly linked to conceptual structure: pronunciation. However, this is still compatible with the idea that at least some of the contents of perception are nonconceptual. See, Jackendoff, *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*, 130-131, 134-138.

#### **4.2.1 The Difference between Perceptions and Beliefs**

I already explained in the first chapter that nonconceptualists often argue that the representational contents of perceptual experiences seem to have characteristics that the conceptual contents of propositional attitudes do not have. I now elaborate on why nonconceptualism has a better account of the relationship between concepts and perceptions than conceptualism has by building on an argument provided by Crane. In what follows, I first summarize Crane's argument. Hereafter, I argue that, by distinguishing between beliefs and perceptions, nonconceptualists can explain why beliefs and perceptions relate to concepts in different ways whereas conceptualists cannot.

##### **4.2.1.1 Crane on the Difference Between Beliefs and Perceptions**

In "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience," Crane presents a two-stage argument to the effect that, because beliefs and perceptions have different characteristics, it follows that perceptions have nonconceptual content. In the first stage, Crane argues that perceptions are not like beliefs. In the second stage, Crane argues that this entails that the contents of perceptions are nonconceptual.<sup>168</sup>

Before he provides his argument, Crane first explains what it is to possess a concept. As mentioned earlier, Crane provides the following definition of nonconceptual content: "For any state with content, *S*, *S* has a nonconceptual content, *P*, iff a subject *X*'s being in *S* does not entail that *X* possesses the concepts that canonically characterise *P*."<sup>169</sup> In order to find out whether there are mental states with nonconceptual content, Crane argues that we must know what concept possession involves. He proposes the following account:

To possess a concept is to be in intentional states whose inferential relations are an appropriate function of their contents. The elements in a thinker's network of intentional states are essentially inferentially related to one another. Concepts are the constituents required to explain these inferential relations. So a thinker could not be in the relevant intentional states unless they contain concepts. Since possessing concepts entails that one is disposed to make certain inferences, then possessing concepts entails that one's intentional states are 'composed' of concepts.<sup>170</sup>

So, according to Crane, to possess a concept, one needs to be in intentional states in which that concept figures. These intentional states stand in three kinds of relations: logical relations, semantic relations and evidential relations. Because intentional states, such as beliefs, stand in these relations to each other, they have the content and the conceptual structure that they do.

Why should conceptualists and nonconceptualists both accept this account of concept possession? By means of an example, I show that the account is intuitively plausible. Consider my possession of the concept 'bird'. To possess the concept 'bird', I need to be in intentional states in which the concept 'bird' figures. For instance, I have the belief that birds are animals. And it seems that I cannot have this belief without having other beliefs too. Those include beliefs that logically follow from

---

<sup>168</sup> Crane, "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience," 149-150.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-148.

it as well as beliefs that are not logical consequences of it, but that you ought to have if the belief is to have the content that it has, such as beliefs about what animals are.<sup>171</sup> These are, respectively, the logical and semantic relations that beliefs stand in. Finally, beliefs also stand in evidential relations to other beliefs and to perceptual experiences. For instance, my seeing that it is raining is evidence for my belief that it rains.<sup>172</sup>

If we accept Crane's account of concept possession and his previously given definition of conceptual and nonconceptual content, it follows that "S has a conceptual content iff X's being in S entails that S has inferentially relevant constituents, and this requires that X is in other states which are inferentially related to S" and that to be in a nonconceptual state, "one does not have to be in other inferentially related states of the kind that give the contents of beliefs their conceptual structure."<sup>173</sup>

Crane then presents his two-stage argument to the effect that the content of perceptual experience is nonconceptual. To start with, he argues that one's perceptions, unlike one's beliefs, are not revisable in the light of other beliefs and perceptions. For example, in the Müller-Lyer illusion discussed earlier, our beliefs about the lengths of the lines are revised in the light of conclusive evidence against our perceptual inclination to believe that the line with the arrows going out is longer than the other lines. In contrast, our perception of the lines does not change; making "perceptions [...] resilient to conclusive counterevidence."<sup>174</sup> This is a first indication that perceptions are not like beliefs. As Crane argued earlier, it is essential to beliefs that they are related to one another by three kinds of relations, including evidential relations. Some beliefs depend on perceptions or other beliefs that function as evidence for or against them. And because of these evidential relations, beliefs can be revised on the basis of the perceptions and beliefs that count for or against them. Although perceptions, like beliefs, can function as evidence for a belief, perceptions are not revisable in the way beliefs are. Therefore, Crane concludes that perceptions do not stand in evidential relations.<sup>175</sup>

Crane then notes that "if conceptual structure is *only* imposed by these evidential relations and the other inferential relations, then perceptions will not have conceptual structure. This is why their contents will not have inferentially relevant constituents: they will not be composed of concepts."<sup>176</sup> To prove that this is the case, Crane examines whether one or both of the other relations that beliefs stand in hold between perceptions. He immediately denies that logical relations hold between perceptions, as deductive inference between experiences seems impossible. A perception can contain, for example, that the sun is shining and that the sky is blue. However, we cannot infer from two separate perceptions, the perception that the sun is shining and the perception that the sky is blue, one perception that the sun is

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 144-146, 151.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 151-152.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 152.

shining *and* that the sky is blue. In the latter case, although the two perceptions might lead to one belief, the two perceptions remain separate.<sup>177</sup>

However, sometimes it seems as if perceptions do have a kind of structure that is very similar to that of beliefs. For example, like beliefs, perceptions seem to have constituents. Crane provides the example of perceiving that a table is brown and rectangular. I cannot perceive that the table is brown and rectangular without also perceiving that the table is rectangular. However, there is an important difference with beliefs. I cannot see the color of the table in isolation from seeing its actual shape. In other words: “the content of the perception that the table is brown *already contains* the perception of its shape.”<sup>178</sup> In contrast, in the case of beliefs, the belief does not already contain the actual shape. The belief that the table has a certain color can be used to infer that the table has a shape, but does not specify the definite shape, and the inference can only be made in the presence of the general belief that colored things have shapes. So, “although it is possible to infer ascriptions of perceptions from one another, this doesn't entail that the perceptions themselves enter into deductive relations.”<sup>179</sup>

Finally, Crane examines whether semantic relations hold between perceptions. According to Crane, perception depends only on the world and an individual's perceptual system, so the perception that *p* requires no other perceptions that one must necessarily have: “You simply perceive what the world and your perceptual systems let you perceive.”<sup>180</sup> So, Crane argues that semantic relations do not seem to hold between perceptions.

Crane concludes that he has established that perception fails to stand in all of the relations that are essential to belief and which give beliefs their conceptual structure. Therefore, “the structure in the contents of perception is not conceptual structure: that is, the inferential structure of the contents of beliefs.”<sup>181</sup>

#### **4.2.1.2 The Difference between Perceptions and Beliefs Revisited**

I now want to build on Crane's conclusion to argue that, by distinguishing between beliefs and perceptions, nonconceptualists can explain why beliefs and perceptions relate to concepts in different ways. However, a recurring theme throughout this thesis is the ease with which philosophers talk past each other in the debate on nonconceptual content. As we have seen, the different sides in the debate are often unconvinced by each other's arguments. Therefore, before I proceed to my own argument that builds on Crane's conclusion, it is necessary to assess whether conceptualists would be convinced by Crane's argument. For each of the relations essential to beliefs, I assess the argument Crane provided.

First, I argue that Crane's example of the Müller-Lyer illusion is an effective means for arguing that perceptions are not revisable in the way beliefs are. Many similar examples can be given that show

---

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 152-153.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 152-154.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

that evidential relations do not hold between perceptions. Consider, for instance, the well-known example of the straight stick that appears to be bent when partially submerged in water. I can hold the stick in my hands and see that it is straight. Although I have the belief that the stick is straight, once the stick is submerged in water, I cannot help to see a bent stick. Examples such as these seem difficult to refute by the conceptualist.<sup>182</sup>

Second, I do not see a way for the conceptualist to refute Crane's idea that deductive inference between perceptual experiences seems impossible. McDowell should acknowledge this point. Making deductive inferences seems to be a deployment of our conceptual capacities, as it involves "produc[ing] presentations ourselves."<sup>183</sup> On McDowell's account, however, perceptual experiences are seen as products of receptivity, which means that they are passive states. Although our conceptual capacities (which belong to spontaneity) are at work in experience according to McDowell, this does not imply that we have influence on the content that we receive. McDowell's idea that one is "saddled" with perceptual content in experience without having any choice in the matter seems to conflict with the idea that the contents of a perceptual experience could be deductively inferred from another perceptual experience.<sup>184</sup>

Third, I doubt that a conceptualist will be convinced by Crane's claim that semantic relations do not hold between perceptions. According to Crane, perception depends only on the world and an individual's perceptual system, but conceptualists are committed to the idea that perception does not just depend on the world and an individual's perceptual system, but also on the concepts one possesses. So, Crane's assumption seems nonconceptualist through and through. It makes assumptions about the main issue that is at stake in the debate, namely, whether the concepts one possess do or do not limit one's perceptual experiences. Therefore, his argument will be unconvincing for the conceptualist.

Still, I believe Crane's argument shows that not all of the relations essential to belief hold between perceptions. By means of this conclusion, I argue that features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences (which differ from those of the relationship between concepts and beliefs) can best be explained by nonconceptualism. That is because I believe Crane's argument poses a challenge for conceptualism: if perceptions would have the same conceptual structure as beliefs, the relationship between concepts and perceptions would be the same or very similar to the relationship between concepts and beliefs, which in turn implies that perceptions should stand in the same relations as beliefs. But if we accept the conclusion of Crane's argument, perceptions do not stand in the same

---

<sup>182</sup> *Comment:* In some cases, it might seem to be the case that evidential relations do hold between perceptions. Consider the following case. Out of the corner of my eye, I (think I) see a man. When I turn my head and closely look again, instead of a man, I only see a tree. Did I revise my perception of the man on the basis of the new perception? I do not think that is the case. My belief that there is a man over there, which I formed on the basis of the former perception, is revised on the basis of the latter perception that functions as conclusive evidence against my belief. But the perception is not revised. Perceptions depend on perspective. When I turn my head again to my original position, and perceive the tree again out of the corner of my eye, instead of a tree, I again (think I) see a man (although I believe and know that there is no man present).

<sup>183</sup> Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason," 1070, B75.

<sup>184</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 10, 66-67.

relations as beliefs. Unlike conceptualism, nonconceptualism has no problem explaining why the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences has different features than the relationship between concepts and beliefs (that is, because perceptions, unlike beliefs, have nonconceptual contents).

A different challenge, however, still remains for nonconceptualists. In chapter 2, I explained that philosophical accounts of perception should respond to McDowell's challenge of explaining how perceptual experiences justify beliefs about the world. If we accept that perceptions are not like beliefs, and that as a result, they must have different contents, it remains unclear how the contents of experience can be captured in judgements; how does the process of conceptualization take place? In the following subsection, I discuss this challenge and explain possible solutions.

#### **4.2.2 Grounding Perceptual Beliefs and Judgements**

I now search for an account of how rational relations can hold between perceptual states with nonconceptual content and cognitive states with conceptual content. Different nonconceptualist theorists have already provided such an account. In this subsection, I discuss the accounts I prefer, and, on the basis of my two preferred accounts, argue that although philosophers of perception perhaps cannot explain how the process of conceptualization takes place in perceptual judgement, there is no philosophical reason for a priori rejecting the idea that something without the form of a judgment can be a reason for a judgement. Before I discuss and examine my preferred accounts, I briefly discuss why I want to take up on the challenge of justification raised by McDowell, as some nonconceptualists simply dismiss the challenge.

A dismissive response to McDowell's challenge is to deny that perceptual experiences justify beliefs at all. Perceptual experiences could play a merely causal role in the formation of our beliefs. However, I argue that it is intuitive to think that perceptual experience gives reasons for beliefs. For example, it is intuitive that my seeing a cow in the meadow, not merely causes, but gives reason for my belief that there is a cow in the meadow. Therefore, I do not want to discuss nor investigate the prospects of this dismissive response any further.

Another dismissive response is given by Burge. Instead of defending the possibility of perceptual experiences justifying our perceptual beliefs, Burge argues that we could settle for epistemic entitlement to perceptual beliefs. As already discussed, Burge thinks that "epistemology cannot dictate to psychology. Nor should it exclude perception from its domain because perception does not meet an armchair conception of what form epistemic norms must take."<sup>185</sup> According to Burge, McDowell's armchair approach seems viable to McDowell because he lacks an adequate understanding of what perception is. With an adequate understanding, one cannot accept the Sellarsian assumption that only something within the 'space of reasons' provides epistemic warrant. According to Burge, even though animals, human infants and many human adults lack reasons for their perceptual beliefs, they are often

---

<sup>185</sup> Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, 435.



epistemically entitled to them. Burge claims that this epistemic entitlement to perceptual beliefs resides in one's "being in perceptual states that reliably figure in the formation of true beliefs."<sup>186</sup> But I reject Burge's response as well. In chapter 2, I argued that constructive debates about nonconceptual content in the philosophy of perception require philosophers to engage with and respond to one another's motivations, arguments and assumptions. Because Burge immediately dismisses McDowell's entire view, let alone his challenge of justification, I do not discuss nor investigate the prospects of Burge's response any further as well.

So, what we need is a nonconceptualist response to McDowell's challenge that takes the issue of justification seriously. In what follows, I argue that combining Fodor's and Michael Ayers's accounts provides a satisfactory response to the challenge. First, I discuss Fodor's response. In "The Revenge of the Given," Fodor argues against McDowell's idea that unconceptualized perceptual states can provide us only with exculpations rather than justifications for our perceptual judgements and beliefs.<sup>187</sup> To defend the idea that unconceptualized representations can ground judgements and beliefs, he argues as follows. An image of three cows standing in the meadow carries information about there being three cows in the meadow. A judgement about this image requires conceptualization, Fodor explains. Anyone who possesses the concepts 'three', 'cows', and 'meadow' is able to see the image *as* showing three cows in the meadow, and therefore, also able to retrieve the information about there being three cows in the meadow, and able to judge that this is so. According to Fodor, the image of the three cows thereby provides a reason, not just an exculpation, for that person to judge that there are three cows. How exactly the process of conceptualization takes place is difficult to answer, Fodor acknowledges. He suggests that perceptual psychology, rather than philosophy, is probably best able to provide an answer.<sup>188</sup>

Another response is given by Ayers. In "Sense Experience, Concepts, and Content," Ayers argues against McDowell's assumption that only something with the form of a judgment can be a reason for a judgement. According to Ayers, there is good reason to believe that something which is not conceptual or propositional in form can ground something which is. Ayers starts by pointing out that his description of, for instance, a zebra is based on something nonconceptual in form, such as a perceiving of a real-life zebra or a drawing or photograph of one. Examples such as these make him wonder why "the experiences and memories that are necessary for my description to be based on these things must themselves be propositional or conceptual[.]"<sup>189</sup> It might be argued that his description of the zebra is not based on the objects he mentions but on certain facts or state of affairs, but Ayers finds this idea unintelligible:

---

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, 8.

<sup>188</sup> Fodor, "The Revenge of the Given," 114-115.

<sup>189</sup> Michael Ayers, "Sense Experience, Concepts, and Content: Objections to Davidson and McDowell," in *Perception and Reality: From Descartes to the Present*, ed. Ralph Schumacher (Paderborn: Mentis, 2004), 248.

If I set out either to depict or to describe a material object such as a zebra, it's the *object* that I am trying to capture, one way or another, with pencil or words, not a set of facts or states of affairs. Which facts I succeed in stating will simply be consequent on the means I employ to describe the object and on how much of my description is true. Which facts I succeed in depicting in my picture will depend on which true descriptions of the object would also be true descriptions of the object as I have drawn it, the object "in" the picture. The descriptions will be propositional and therefore conceptual, but neither the object as it is nor the object as I have depicted it, (the picture content) are propositional or conceptual. The same goes, as far as I can see, for the object as I experience it, the content of my experience. An account of this content, like an account of anything else, will be propositional; but not the content itself.<sup>190</sup>

Next, Ayers gives another example. The belief or judgment that there is a cow in the meadow is different from a picture of a cow in the meadow. The former has a different logical form and a specific conceptually determinate content that the latter does not have. So, for Ayers, it is obvious that pictorial content is nonconceptual. Because pictorial content seems to be a kind of visual content, we have good reason to suppose that visual content, like pictorial content, is nonconceptual. Ayers continues by arguing that the two types of content – visual or pictorial content and propositional content – are *incommensurable*, as "each has its own kinds of determinacy and indeterminacy."<sup>191</sup> On the one hand, pictures are less precise than judgements, because many different descriptions of a single picture can be given. On the other hand, pictures are more precise than judgements, because different pictures might be used to depict a single judgement. Ayers notes that the differences do not imply that there is an "unbridgeable opposition" between the two types of content, because demonstrative concepts bring the two together. Moreover, although there are differences between the two types of content, Ayers points out that the pictorial content, which lacks propositional or conceptual content, can be described, and that a description in turn can be illustrated in a picture.<sup>192</sup>

On the basis of these ideas, Ayers argues that experiences can ground beliefs:

It is then, no more a *deep* truth about experience that we perceive, e.g. see, *that things are thus and so* than it is a deep truth about photographs that they record that *things are thus and so*, or, for that matter, than it is a deep truth about the world *that things are thus and so*. Broadly speaking (and except in special cases), concepts and propositions only come into the act when we endeavour to *say*, to others or to ourselves, how we are perceiving things, or how photographs have recorded them, or how things are. When language is employed to describe things seen, or photographed, as they are seen, or photographed, the thought expressed has propositional form. But that does not mean that the experience itself, i.e. what is presented in the experience, any more than what the photograph shows, mysteriously takes on propositional form. And [...] in each case the propositional account of non-propositional representational content is based or grounded on that content, not simply caused by it. It has to be so grounded, in order to be an account of the thing of which it is an account. The cause of a description is not *thereby* its object. The object of a non-accidentally true description has both to cause and to ground it.<sup>193</sup>

To summarize, Ayers explains that, although descriptions have conceptual structure, the objects that the descriptions are about are not conceptual and neither are pictures depicting that object. The

---

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 251.

relationship between descriptions and objects or pictures is much the same as the relationship between judgements about experiences and experiences themselves: a judgement about the content of a perceptual experience is propositional, and thereby conceptual, but that does not mean that the content of the perceptual experience itself is. Because pictorial content seems to be a kind of visual content, and it is intuitive to assume that pictorial content is nonconceptual, we have good reason to suppose that visual content is nonconceptual as well. And on the basis of Ayers's account, I argue that we do not have to reject the idea that nonconceptual contents of perceptual experiences can be conceptualized: we have no reason to assume on a priori grounds, like McDowell, that the contents of perceptual experiences cannot be captured in conceptual contents (and vice versa), because the conceptualization of nonconceptual perceptual contents can be similar to the familiar process of describing the pictorial content of a picture (or the reverse process of depicting the contents of a description in a picture).

So far, we established *that* the contents of perceptual experiences can be captured in judgements or beliefs, but not *how* the contents of perceptual experiences are captured in judgements or beliefs. Neither Fodor nor Ayers provides an account of how exactly the process of conceptualization takes place. However, as Fodor already explained, perhaps philosophy can rely on the cognitive sciences to provide us with an answer. Although the sciences are not concerned with a priori epistemology, they do give explanations of the mechanisms of perception that include brain processes that we can equate with the process of conceptualization. For example, in *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*, Jackendoff describes the process that takes place from having a visual perception to making a statement about that perception: "Light striking the eyes leads the mind/brain to compute a visual surface. The mind/brain links this to a visual meaning, encoded in terms of spatial structure. The spatial structure in turn can link to a conceptual structure, which can link to pronunciation, which then can be converted into motor instructions to the vocal tract so you say something."<sup>194</sup> According to Jackendoff, the contents of the perception are first captured in a spatial structure, and only at a later stage, this spatial structure can be linked to a conceptual structure by our brain. It seems to me that we could equate this process with the process of conceptualization. This explanation fits with Ayers's account, in which it is only when we use language to judge/say to ourselves or to others how things are according to our perceptions that concepts and propositions come into play.

I believe that examples as these show the interconnections in the works of philosophers of perception and cognitive scientists. If the sciences can explain how the mind exactly links spatial structures to conceptual structures, philosophers can use these explanations to elaborate on the process of conceptualization in perceptual judgement. Thus, I believe that by collaborating with the cognitive sciences, the prospects of providing an account of the justification of perceptual judgements and perceptual beliefs by perceptual experiences for nonconceptualists are good. Thereby, nonconceptualism does not just meet my second condition for philosophical accounts of perception (i.e.,

---

<sup>194</sup> Jackendoff, *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*, 124.

it can account for features of the relationship between perceptions and concepts including justification), but also meets the first condition (i.e., being compatible with the empirical sciences) to an even greater extent than I argued for so far.

So, although philosophers of perception might not be able to explain how the process of conceptualization takes place in perceptual judgement, I believe that nonconceptualists can give a satisfactory response to McDowell's challenge of explaining that nonconceptual perceptual experiences can justify perceptual beliefs and judgements: first, there is no philosophical reason to a priori reject the idea that something without the form of a judgment can be a reason for a judgement, and second, nonconceptualists can rely on the cognitive sciences to explain how the process of conceptualization takes place in perceptual judgement.

### **4.3 Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to examine the extent to which nonconceptualism is able to meet the two conditions I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception: to repeat, (1) they must be compatible with what is known from the empirical sciences, and (2) they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and experience including justification. In the first section of the chapter, I showed that nonconceptualism is not just compatible with empirical science, but is motivated by it. To show that this is the case, I argued that findings and explanations from perceptual psychology and linguistics can be used to support the argument from animal and infant perception. In the second section, I argued that nonconceptualism is able to provide a satisfactory account of features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences including justification. First, by means of Crane's argument that perceptions are not beliefs and that they therefore lack conceptual structure, I argued that the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences (which differs from the relationship between concepts and beliefs) can be best explained by nonconceptualism. Second, I argued that nonconceptualists can give a satisfactory response to McDowell's challenge of explaining how nonconceptual perceptual experiences can justify perceptual beliefs and judgements. By building on Fodor's and Ayers's responses to the challenge presented by McDowell, I showed that there is no philosophical reason to a priori reject the idea that something without the form of a judgment or belief can be a reason for a judgement or belief and that nonconceptualists can rely on the cognitive sciences to explain how the process of conceptualization takes place in perceptual judgement. Because nonconceptualism, unlike conceptualism, meets my two conditions, I conclude that nonconceptualism is the most promising position in the debate on nonconceptual content.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis explored the debate on nonconceptual content in perception. The aim of the thesis was twofold. First, I attempted to assess the two positions in the debate on nonconceptual content as fairly as possible by proposing two conditions for philosophical accounts of perception. Second, I examined the conceptualist and nonconceptualist position on the basis of my two conditions. The conclusion of my thesis is that, given my conditions for philosophical accounts of perception, the nature of perceptual content can best be understood as nonconceptual.

I arrived at this conclusion in the following manner. Chapter 1 set out to shed light on the central issues within the debate on nonconceptual content. I discussed the commitments of, and motivations and challenges for both conceptualism and nonconceptualism, as well as the different ways in which one can be a conceptualist or nonconceptualist. I explained that the most important arguments for nonconceptualism are the argument from the fine-grained nature of perception, the argument that perceptual experiences and propositional attitudes have different characteristics, and the argument from animal and infant perception; the most important argument for conceptualism is the epistemological consideration that nonconceptualism has a hard time explaining how beliefs are rationally grounded in experiences. Conceptualism, in turn, has problems with accounting for how we learn observational concepts and how human perception is similar to animal and infant perception.

In chapter 2, I argued that it is difficult to evaluate whether conceptualism or nonconceptualism is the stronger position, because both positions favor different kinds of arguments and dismiss arguments from the opposing position as a result of their different methodological approaches. I discussed how debate continues about what kind of answer must be given to the question of whether there is nonconceptual content in perception. Many nonconceptualists think of it as not solely a philosophical question, but, at least in part, also an empirical one. They believe that to answer it, we need an account of (the mechanisms of) perception itself. This approach stands in contrast to the approach of the conceptualist armchair philosopher McDowell, who believes that this question can be answered on the basis of philosophical reflection alone. As a result of their respective interpretations of the question, the motivations that drive conceptualists and nonconceptualists are very different in nature. I argued that these different approaches of conceptualists and nonconceptualists do not allow for a constructive debate as the most important arguments from the opposing side are not adequately responded to or are immediately dismissed. Next, in an attempt to find common ground between the two positions, I proposed two conditions that philosophical accounts of perception must meet to solve the issue of philosophers talking past each other. First, philosophical accounts of perception must be compatible with what is known from the empirical sciences. Second, they must account for features of the relationship between concepts and experience including justification. If philosophical accounts of perception meet these two conditions, they engage with or respond to the most important motivations of and challenges raised by their opponents.

The aim of chapter 3 was to examine the extent to which McDowell's conceptualism meets the two conditions I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception. First, I argued that, although McDowell's conceptualism is evidently not informed by empirical science, it is difficult to evaluate whether his position is incompatible with what is known from the empirical sciences. I explained that although some explanations in the field of linguistics go against some of McDowell's underlying assumptions about the structure of thoughts, it is difficult to refute McDowell's distinction between human and animal perception by empirical findings. Next, I discussed how the same problem occurred for McDowell's ideas about the difference between veridical perceptions and hallucinations. After failing to establish that McDowell's account fails to meet the first condition I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception, I examined the extent to which McDowell's conceptualism is able to meet the second condition. I argued that, although McDowell offers a convincing story of the justification of perceptual beliefs by perceptual experience, his conceptualism fails to account for other features of the relationship between concepts and experience: McDowell fails to provide an explanation of the grounds on which concepts are drawn into the contents of perception in illusions and hallucinations. Because McDowell cannot account for some features of the relationship between concepts and perception, I concluded that he fails to meet the second condition.

In chapter 4, I argued that, unlike conceptualism, nonconceptualism meets the two conditions I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception. First, I argued that nonconceptualism meets my first condition: I showed that nonconceptualism is not just compatible with empirical science, but is motivated by it, as is apparent in the argument from animal and infant perception. Findings and explanations from perceptual psychology and linguistics can be used to support the argument from animal and infant perception and defend the argument against objections from conceptualists. Second, I argued in two steps that nonconceptualism is able to meet the second condition I set for philosophical accounts of perception. In the first step, I showed, by means of Crane's argument that perceptions are not beliefs and that they therefore lack conceptual structure, that features of the relationship between concepts and perceptual experiences (which differ from those of the relationship between concepts and beliefs) can be best explained by nonconceptualism. In the second step, I turned to the issue of justification. I argued that nonconceptualists can give a satisfactory response to McDowell's challenge of explaining how nonconceptual perceptual experiences can justify perceptual beliefs and judgements: from Fodor's and Ayers's responses to the challenge presented by McDowell, I concluded that we cannot reject on a priori grounds that something without the form of a judgment can be a reason for a judgment. Although philosophers do not seem able to provide an account of how the process of conceptualization takes place in perceptual judgement, I argued that nonconceptualists can rely on the cognitive sciences to explain it. Thereby, I reached the conclusion that nonconceptualism is the most promising position in the debate on nonconceptual content in the philosophy of perception.

By reaching this conclusion, I hope to have contributed to the debate on nonconceptual content in the philosophy of perception. This thesis took a first step towards a deeper understanding of the issues

that complicate the debate. My thesis has shown that methodological as well as terminological disagreements make philosophers talk past each other and I hope the two conditions I proposed in this thesis provide a basis for a more constructive debate.

Because of the limited scope of this thesis, I have not discussed nor argued for a particular nonconceptualist view. As a result, several questions still remain to be answered. For example, which nonconceptualist account is best able to meet the conditions I proposed for philosophical accounts of perception? How does perceptual content get its structure? Is perceptual content entirely nonconceptual or partly nonconceptual? How should we conceive of the relationship between the nonconceptual contents and conceptual contents of perceptions? And how do the concepts a perceiver possesses affect one's perceptions?

## Bibliography

- Ayers, Michael. "Sense Experience, Concepts, and Content: Objections to Davidson and McDowell." In *Perception and Reality: From Descartes to the Present*, edited by Ralph Schumacher, 239-262. Paderborn: Mentis, 2004.
- Bermúdez, José and Arnon Cahen. "Nonconceptual Mental Content." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/content-nonconceptual/> (accessed on 12-03-2019).
- Bermúdez, José Luis. *Thinking without Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- . "What Is at Stake in the Debate on Nonconceptual Content?." *Philosophical Perspectives* 21 (2007): 55-72.
- Blake, Randolph, and Robert Sekuler. *Perception*. Fifth Edition. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006.
- Bremmers, Loren. *A Comparison of Davidson's and McDowell's Accounts of Perceptual Beliefs*. Honours Bachelor's Thesis (2017), <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/353882> (accessed on 01-05-2019).
- Burge, Tyler. "Disjunctivism Again." *Philosophical Explorations* 14, no.1 (2011): 43-80.
- . "Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology." *Philosophical Topics* 33, no. 1 (2005): 1-78.
- . *Origins of Objectivity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- . "Perceptual Entitlement." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67, no. 3 (2003): 503-548.
- Byrne, Alex. "Perception and Conceptual Content." In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, edited by Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa, 231-250. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
- Campbell, John. "Demonstrative Reference, the Relational View of Experience, and the Proximity Principle." In *New Essays on Singular Thought*, edited by Robin Jeshion. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199567881.003.0007> (accessed on 14-06-2019).
- Coates, Paul. "Sense-Data." In *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ISSN 2161-0002). <https://www.iep.utm.edu/sense-da/> (accessed on 13-06-2019).
- Crane, Tim. "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience." In *The Contents of Experience: Essays on Perception*, edited by Tim Crane, 136-157. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.



- Cussins, Adrian. "Content, Conceptual Content, and Nonconceptual Content." In *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, edited by York H. Gunther, 133-163. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.
- DeVries, Willem A. "Wilfrid Sellars." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/sellars/> (accessed on 13-06-2019).
- Dummett, Michael. *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*. Bloomsbury Revelations Edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- Evans, Gareth. *The Varieties of Reference*, edited by John McDowell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Fish, William. *Philosophy of Perception: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.
- Fodor, Jerry. "The Revenge of the Given." In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Brian P. McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen, 105-116. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Gaynesford, Maximilian de. *John McDowell*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.
- Heck, Richard G. "Are There Different Kinds of Content?" In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Brian P. McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen, 117-138. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- . "Nonconceptual Content and the 'Space of Reasons'." *Philosophical Review* 109, no. 4 (2000): 483–523.
- Jackendoff, Ray. *A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Kant, Immanuel. "Critique of Pure Reason." In *Classics of Western Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Cahn, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., 1034-1109. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Incorporation, 2012.
- McDowell, John. "Conceptual Capacities in Perception." In *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*, 127-144. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- . "Knowledge and the Internal." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 4 (1995): 877-893.
- . *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- . "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind." In *The Engaged Intellect*, 257-275. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

- . “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism.” In *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson: Library of Living Philosophers XXVII*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, 87-104. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999.
- . “Sellars and the Space of Reasons.” Lecture in Cape-town (2004), <http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/me-core/downloads/McD%20Cape%20Town%20talk--Sellars%20EPM.doc> (accessed on 26-04-2019).
- . “Tyler Burge on Disjunctivism.” *Philosophical Explorations* 13, no. 3 (2010): 243-255.
- Peacocke, Christopher. “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 5 (2001): 239-264.
- . “Nonconceptual Content Defended.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, no. 2 (1998): 381-388.
- . “Phenomenology and Nonconceptual Content.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, no. 3 (2001): 609-615.
- Poston, Ted. “Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology.” In *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ISSN 2161-0002). <https://www.iep.utm.edu/int-ext/> (accessed on 13-06-2019).
- Sellars, Wilfrid. “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1, no. 19 (1956): 253-329.
- Siegel, Susanna. “The Contents of Perception.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/perception-contents/> (accessed on 12-03-2019).
- Smith, Joel. “Self-Consciousness.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/self-consciousness/> (accessed on 17-05-2019).
- Soteriou, Matthew. *Disjunctivism*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.
- . “The Disjunctive Theory of Perception.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/perception-disjunctive/> (accessed on 06-05-2019).
- Stroud, Barry. “Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought.” In *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, edited by Nicholas H. Smith, 79-91. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Thornton, Tim. *John McDowell*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967.

Wolfe, Jeremy M., Keith R. Kluender, Dennis M. Levi, Linda M. Bartoshuk, Rachel S. Herz, Roberta L. Klatzky, Susan J. Lederman, and Daniel M. Merfeld. *Sensation & Perception*. Fourth Edition. Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 2015.

Wright, Crispin. "Human Nature." In *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, edited by Nicholas H. Smith, 140-159. London: Routledge, 2002.

Wright, Wayne. "Nonconceptual Content." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception*, edited by Mohan Matthen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, July 2015.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600472.013.003> (accessed on 14-03-2019).