

CONCEPTS AND EXPERIENCE

Conceitos e Experiência

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Abstract: In this paper, I focus on the thesis of Non-conceptualism regarding perceptual experience, such as construed by Robert Hanna in his reading of Kant. My aim here is two-fold. First, I argue that Non-conceptualism so construed is motivated by worries distinct from the ones that motivate Conceptualism, such as construed by John McDowell in his influential book *Mind and World*. Second, I argue that Non-conceptualism and Conceptualism, as construed by Hanna and McDowell, respectively, are in fact compatible views.

Keywords: Non-conceptualism; Conceptualism; Perception; Robert Hanna; John McDowell; Kant.

Resumo: Neste artigo, tenho como foco a tese do Não-conceitualismo acerca da experiência perceptual, tal como interpretada por Robert Hanna em sua leitura de Kant. Meu objetivo aqui é duplo. Primeiro, argumento que o Não-conceitualismo, assim interpretado, é motivado por preocupações distintas daqueles que motivam o Conceitualismo, tal como interpretado por John McDowell, em seu influente livro *Mind and World* (1994). Segundo, argumento que o Não-conceitualismo e o Conceitualismo, tal como interpretados por Hanna e McDowell, respectivamente, são, na verdade, posições compatíveis entre si.

Palavras-chave: Não-conceitualismo; Conceitualismo; Percepção; Robert Hanna; John McDowell; Kant.

1. Introduction

In his *Kant, Science and Human Nature* (2006) and elsewhere¹, Robert Hanna forcefully argues for a reading according to which Kant should be taken as a non-conceptualist regarding perceptual experience. My aim in this paper is not to challenge this reading². Rather, I would like to show, firstly, that Non-conceptualism, as construed by Hanna, is motivated by worries distinct from the ones that motivate Conceptualism, such as construed by John McDowell in his influential book *Mind and World* (1994). While Non-conceptualism springs from worries regarding the necessary conditions for us to be in perceptual contact with material objects, Conceptualism springs from an attempt to consider our perceptual contact with the world in terms which make justice to

¹ See Hanna (2005).

² For discussion of this issue, see, for instance, Ginsborg (2008), Allais (2009), Pereira (2012) and Gomes (2014).

the image we have of ourselves regarding this very contact. Secondly, I will try to show that Non-conceptualism and Conceptualism, as construed by Hanna and McDowell, respectively, are in fact compatible views.

2. Non-conceptualism and Direct Perceptual Realism

According to Robert Hanna, Kant is a proponent of direct empirical realism in the sense that “every self-conscious human cognizer has non-epistemic, non-conceptual, and otherwise unmediated veridical perceptual or observational access to some macrophysical dynamic material objects in objectively real space and time” (2006: 45). Thus, the perceptual contact with material objects, in objectively real space and time, would not require the subject to possess any beliefs about these very objects. This is the non-epistemic aspect of perception. Moreover, the content of perceptual states would not need to involve any concepts whatsoever under which the objects perceived fall. In fact, a subject could have a perceptual state with a given content even if the subject lacked concepts altogether or were unable—momentarily or not—to apply concepts for the objects perceived. Thus—and I take this to be the central point—the perceptual contact with material objects in objectively real space and time would not require the possession and application of any concepts. This is the non-conceptual aspect of perception³. A passage from Kant that helps to substantiate Hanna’s reading is the following: “If a savage (*Wilder*) sees a house from a distance for example, with whose use he is not acquainted, he admittedly has before him in his representation the very same object as someone else who is acquainted with it determinately as a dwelling established for humans” (1992:33). Thus, this is a case of one being in perceptual contact with a house without forming the belief that there is a house out there—or any other beliefs involving the concept HOUSE—precisely because one does not possess such a concept, in the same way, as put by Hanna, that one can be in perceptual contact with a particle accelerator “without having any specific (online) capacity for conceptualizing *particle-accelerators*” (2006:106/author’s italics).

³ This last formulation of Non-conceptualism corresponds to what Hanna calls “very-strong non-conceptuality” (2006:103). Although he goes on to discuss less strong versions of Non-conceptualism, I take it that they are interlocked, and that it is very-strong non-conceptuality that drives the less demanding versions of the idea. I return to this issue below.

So construed, the Kantian position is similar to views more recently defended by philosophers such as Evans (1982) and Dretske (2000). According to the latter, "...one can see an X (a star, a rock, a cat) without believing (and, therefore, without knowing) that it (what is seen) is an X" (2000a:99), and "Lacking the concept of a pentagon (not to mention the concept of awareness), the *only* awareness the child has when she sees a pentagon is an awareness of the pentagon and its shape...what the child lacks is not a visual awareness (2000b:176/author's italics), that is, a child can be visually aware (or see) a pentagon while lacking the corresponding concept. So, Dretske is also committed to the idea that perceptual contact with objects does not require beliefs or possession and application of any concepts for these very objects.

Dretske is especially helpful here because of his clarity regarding what the issue under discussion is. The issue is not whether humans typically form beliefs for what is perceived, or whether humans typically possess and apply concepts for what is perceived. Certainly, humans endowed with language typically do form beliefs for what is perceived and possess and apply concepts for what is perceived. The issue is whether beliefs and concepts *are necessary* for the perceptual contact with objects. As Dretske puts it, regarding the necessity of beliefs for visual perception, the question is "about whether ...having a belief *about the perceptual object* is *essential* to its being a perceptual object—essential, that is, to its *being seen*" (2000:99/author's italics). And here Dretske would say no, and so would Kant, if Hanna's reading is correct.

One other way to frame the issue is by considering the conditions—whether empirical or transcendental—which *are* necessary for the perceptual contact with material objects. According to the story being considered, the possession and application of concepts will not figure among them. In Hanna's reading of Kant, what will figure instead are a set transcendental conditions according to which subjects representing objects spatiotemporally and having corresponding spatiotemporal abilities, such the "ability to locate, consciously and uniquely, a material object in space relative to her own body...and also consciously to follow the various causal-dynamic local changes and local movements of the actual material object (2006: 137)" are necessary for the perceptual contact with objects.

For the present purposes, we need not discuss these conditions in any detail. What is of interest to us is precisely the fact that the possession and applications of

concepts are not among them. Thus, we can characterize the present version of Non-conceptualism regarding perception as follows:

Non-conceptualism: In order for a subject to be in perceptual contact with objects in objectively real space and time, she need not possess or apply any of the concepts required to specify the objects she is contact with.

Notice that this is certainly not the only way for one to present Non-conceptualism regarding perception. One may present the idea as being, for instance, that even if concepts are possessed and applied for objects perceived, these do not determine the content of perceptual states. In fact, perceptual states would have contents different in kind from those of states whose contents are conceptually determined, such as beliefs. However, I believe that Hanna take these views as being interlocked with Non-conceptualism as presented above and motivated by it, in the sense that, given that possession and application of concepts is not necessary for one to be perceptual contact with objects, the content of perceptual states is best seen as not being determined by concepts and in fact as being different in kind from the content of states which are so determined, such as beliefs. Non-conceptualism as construed above would thus be central to the discussion, and so I will take it as the focus of this paper. In the next section, I turn my attention to Conceptualism.

3. Conceptualism and Our Perceptual Contact with the World

Probably the most famous version of Conceptualism in recent contemporary philosophy is the one presented by McDowell in his *Mind and World* (1994). McDowell tells us that in “one particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement...So it is conceptual content (1994: 26).⁴

⁴ McDowell has more recently reshaped his views on perceptual content (see McDowell 2009). Although he now speaks of “intuitional content” (thus seeking to walk closer to a certain reading of Kant) and resists the idea that such content is propositional in nature, he insists that it is conceptual in the more relevant sense that conceptual capacities are operative in experience. Thus, I take this view to be in the same spirit as the one presented in *Mind and World*, if less demanding on what it takes for a content to be

At first sight, this appears to be clearly incompatible with Non-conceptualism as construed above. If what is given to us in perceptual experience⁵ is, for instance, *that the wall is blue*—which is “a perceptible fact, as aspect of the perceptible world” (IBID)—then the content of perceptual experience is fully determined by concepts applied by subjects before the world. But also, and relatedly, one can be in perceptual contact with such an aspect of the world only if in possession of concepts such as WALL and BLUE and only if these concepts are applied before the world.

As is well known, McDowell’s views on perceptual experience are meant to address a worry regarding—in his words—“thought’s contact with the world” (2002: 284). The worry is that, if, for instance, my thought that the wall is blue is not rationally constrained by the world – if it is not “answerable to the *empirical* world” regarding its correction or incorrection— (1994:xii/author’s italics), then “we put at risk our entitlement to the very idea of objective content” (IBID); that is, we put at risk the very idea that my thought that the wall is blue is directed towards the world—and the same applies to all thoughts that purport to be world-directed. However, our primary contact with the world is via perceptual experience. So, in order to guarantee the directedness of our thoughts to the world, perceptual experience should be taken as being in rational relations with empirical beliefs. Given that, for McDowell, perceptual experience can only be in such relations if it possesses conceptual content, it should be understood as having conceptual content.⁶

It is important to consider that, when McDowell puts his worries in such terms, he is not trying to advance a substantial philosophical theory. Rather, he is seeking to make justice to a certain image we have of ourselves regarding our relation to the world—an image which is in fact essential to our understanding of ourselves. According to this image, our relations to the world are not merely causal; they are normative in nature: the world provides us with reasons for our beliefs and actions. And given that our primary contact with the world is via perceptual experience, perceptual experience provides us with such reasons. Notice, moreover, that it is an aspect of the image we

conceptual. For the purposes of this paper, I will remain focused on the position such as it was presented in *Mind and World*.

⁵ It will be assumed throughout the discussion that the experiences in case are veridical ones.

⁶ McDowell takes his views here as being close to Kant’s, and it is a matter of debate between him and Hanna not only whether Kant is best seen as a conceptualist or non-conceptualist, but also, and probably more importantly, what are the worries that move Kant to adopt his views on perceptual experience. I remain neutral on this debate.

have of ourselves in our relation to the world that we are in perceptual contact with worldly *facts*, and not with mere objects. We are in perceptual contact with the (conceptually structured) worldly fact *that the wall is blue*, and not with a mere object—the wall that sits before us—that happens to instantiate the property of being blue.

This point is similar in spirit to one made by philosophers in the phenomenological tradition. Heidegger, for instance, insists in several passages of *Being and Time* and elsewhere that, in perceptual experience, we are not in contact with mere objects, for which we subsequently confer a meaning. In one of his earlier lectures, Heidegger presents the example of perceiving the lectern in a lecture hall:

In the experience of seeing the lectern something is given *to me* from out of an immediate environment [*Umwelt*]. This environmental milieu (lectern, book, blackboard, notebook, fountain pen, caretaker, student fraternity, tram-car, motor-car, etc.) does not consist just of things, objects, which are then conceived as meaning this and this; rather, the meaningful is primary and immediately given to me without any mental detours across thing-oriented apprehension (2002:61).

He also writes, in *Being and Time*, regarding sound perception:

What we “first” hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling (1962:207).

As the debate between Hubert Dreyfus and McDowell made clear⁷, there are delicate issues regarding the relation between McDowell’s ideas and those put forward by philosophers in the phenomenological tradition such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. It might be debated, for instance, whether McDowell is viewing our perceptual contact with the world in terms which are more intellectual than these phenomenologists would admit. My aim here, however, is not to engage in this debate in any substantial way. Rather, I would like to point out an agreement that might be not one on detail, but it is one in spirit. This agreement rests precisely on the idea that, if we are to describe the

⁷ For discussion, see the articles gathered in Shear (2013).

image we have of ourselves regarding our perceptual contact with the world—or, to put in other terms, if we are to describe what it is for us to be in such a contact—then it would be a serious mistake to take us as being in contact with mere objects. Rather, the image we have of ourselves is one according to which we are in contact with the world taken in *meaningful* terms. In McDowell’s way of describing things, we are in perceptual contact with worldly facts. Heidegger would probably prefer to describe it in terms of us being in perceptual contact with the meaningful (or meaningful situations, to be put it in terms more readily identifiable with Merleau-Ponty’s work).⁸ Be that as it may—and ignoring delicate issues that one might wish to raise regarding the ontology of facts or situations—, I take it that McDowell and philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, such as Heidegger, have at least one common worry: to consider our perceptual contact with the world in terms which make justice to the image we have of ourselves regarding this very contact. Given this common worry, it is not surprising that the resulting description is similar in spirit: we are in perceptual contact not with mere objects, but with something like facts or meaningful situations. I take it that a proper formulation of McDowell’s version of Conceptualism would be nothing more than a statement of this idea, such as:

Conceptualism: Given the image we have of ourselves in our relation to the world, we are in perceptual contact with (conceptually structured) worldly facts.

I am now in position to state what I take to be the main point of this paper. If the reading of McDowell rehearsed above is on the right track, then McDowell’s Conceptualism should not be understood as a substantial philosophical theory on perception and its content. Rather, it is an attempt to make justice to the image we have of ourselves regarding our relation to the world. Given McDowell’s way of describing

⁸ Notice that I am *not* claiming that there are no differences between stating that we are in perceptual contact with facts and stating that we are in perceptual contact with meaningful situations. I am not claiming, for instance, that Heidegger would defend a view according to which perceptual content has something like a propositional structure. Although people such as Dennis (2012) have tried to bring McDowell’s and Heidegger’s views close to each other in a matter of detail, this is not my aim here. I just aim to establish a common worry and to suggest that their positions are similar in spirit, given this common worry. For an excellent discussion of whether Heidegger might be taken as a proponent of Conceptualism, and a defense of this reading, see Golob (2014).

this image, we are in perceptual contact with worldly facts, which can then be taken as reasons for empirical beliefs.

It should be clear, however, that the worries Hanna attributes to Kant regarding our perceptual contact with the world are quite distinct. The worry here is not to make justice to the image we have of ourselves regarding our relation to the world. Rather, the worry is something like the following: What conditions must be in place in order for a subject to be in perceptual contact (to *see*, for instance) a material object in the world? To put it differently, the worry is one regarding the conditions that must be in place in order for a subject to be in sensory contact (to see, hear etc.) with the material objects that sit before us. These conditions might then be understood as being either empirical or transcendental—of course, a Kantian philosophy will take the latter course.

Not only is this worry distinct from McDowell's, but also, and equally important, McDowell would certainly not deny that one can be in perceptual contact with material objects (or mere objects, as put above) in the absence of beliefs about these very objects and concepts under which they fall. This is precisely the point of McDowell's discussion on *Mind and World* of non-human animals as having a "perceptual sensitivity to the environment" (1994:119). Non-human animals cannot be in perceptual contact with worldly facts in the absence of concepts. A cat cannot be in perceptual contact with the fact *that the wall is blue*. But this is not of course a matter of sensory impairment. A cat can certainly see a blue wall. Thus, if Hanna believes, in his reading of Kant, that concepts do not figure among the conditions which are necessary for one to be in perceptual contact with material objects, he would, I think, find McDowell in agreement. That is, McDowell would agree that Non-conceptualism, as construed above, is true.

What is important to notice, however, is that by presenting necessary conditions for one to be in perceptual contact with material objects—and this is of course a major achievement, whether philosophical or empirical—one has not addressed McDowell's worries at all. For his worries are not related to our perceptual—or, more clearly put, sensory—contact with mere objects, but with our contact with the world, given the image of we have of ourselves in this regard. And these two different worries ask for different philosophical reactions. It certainly seems right to say, with Dretske and Hanna's Kant, that concepts are not necessary for one to see, for instance, a wall. But

given the image we have of ourselves regarding our relation with the world, we are not in contact with a mere object that sits before us—the wall—for which we subsequently confer a meaning. We are in perceptual contact with something like facts or meaningful situations—that the wall is blue, that there is a wall over there or, in terms closer to Heidegger's, in contact with a wall asking to be painted.

4. Perceptual Content

So, it seems that Conceptualism and Non-conceptualism, as construed above, are in fact compatible theses. But, one may ask, what of perceptual content? Interlocked with the theses of Conceptualism and Non-conceptualism as presented above is the idea that perceptual content is either determined by concepts, for the proponent of Conceptualism, or it is not, for the proponent of Non-conceptualism. If the two theses as construed above are compatible, does this imply the absurd idea that perceptual content is both determined and not determined by concepts?

It does not. It could be argued, for instance, that there are two kinds of mental states involved here. One is the state of being sensory aware of material objects that sit before us, which can be tokened as a state of one seeing a material object (a mere object), smelling it etc. One would not need to possess and apply concepts in order to be in a state of this type, and its content would not be determined by concepts.⁹ But maybe there is one other kind of mental state, also perceptual in nature, that corresponds to the more robust notion of a perceptual experience. This would not be a matter of one being sensory aware of the mere objects that sit before us. Rather, it would be a matter of one being in perceptual contact with something like facts or meaningful situations. One would need to possess and apply concepts in order to be in a state of this type, and its contents would be determined by concepts. There is no reason in principle why these states could not co-exist in our mental economy.

I will not explore this route in any detail here, but a view along these lines has been recently defended by Bengson, Groube & Korman (2011), and it is not far from

⁹ I am here appealing to the distinction between state non-conceptualism and content non-conceptualism, and considering a version of non-conceptualism that is committed to both. For discussion, see Bermúdez (2007) and Toribio (2008).

ideas defended by Dretske¹⁰ (see, for instance, Dretske 1993). I would like to end by suggesting another way of approaching the issue. Maybe it is not that these two stories co-exist given one and only account of the nature of perception. Sticking closer to what was defended above, Non-conceptualism and Conceptualism spring from two distinct worries. Non-conceptualism, as discussed here and as construed by Hanna, is mainly a reaction to a worry regarding our perceptual contact with material objects. Conceptualism, as construed by McDowell, is mainly a reaction to a worry regarding our relation with the world given the image we have of ourselves. If we approach the issue given the first worry, Non-conceptualism seems the right position to adopt, and perceptual content is best seen as not determined by concepts. If we approach it given the second worry, then Conceptualism seems the way to go, and perceptual content is best seen as determined by concepts. Thus, the suggestion is that we cannot answer the question of whether perceptual content is determined by concepts or not without taking seriously what worry it is a reaction to. For the two different worries considered here will lead to plausible and distinct answers to this very question. This does not mean that perceptual content is both determined and not determined by concepts. It only means that one *can* both defend the view that perceptual content is determined by concepts and the view that it is not determined by concepts. One cannot, however, do so at the same time, given the pressure of a single worry, but only if under the pressure of one worry and then of another.¹¹

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¹⁰ Dretske, however, would link the perception of facts to belief states, what needs to be denied if one wants to sustain the view that the states we are in when in contact with facts are perceptual and not cognitive in nature.

¹¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *Kant, Science and Human Nature* workshop held at The Federal University of Minas Gerais. I would like to thank the participants for numerous insightful questions. I would also like to thank Roberto Horácio de Sá Pereira for commenting on this paper and correcting me on several points.

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