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**McDowell, Demonstrative Concepts, and
Nonconceptual Representational Content**
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In giving an account of the content of perceptual experience, several authors, including Fred Dretske, Gareth Evans, Christopher Peacocke, and Michael Tye, have employed the notion of nonconceptual representational content.¹ Assuming that one already accepts that perceptual experience has a representational content, the most straightforward argument for embracing nonconceptual content is based on the fine-grained nature of experience. The rich detail of features presented in our experience outstrips the conceptual capacities of even the most sophisticated creatures, and thus one could not possess all the concepts which are used in giving a report of the representational content of her experience. This would seem to rule out the possibility of the representational content of experience being entirely conceptual in nature, leaving nonconceptual content, whatever it might turn out to be, as an option the representationalist must seriously consider.

Nonconceptual content is not without its critics, however. John McDowell (1994), a staunch opponent of nonconceptual content, claims that it provides for a “hopeless” picture of the role of perceptual experience in fixing and justifying belief. Obviously, we should reject any account of experience which cannot explain its close connection with belief. McDowell also has argued that, owing to the nature of

demonstrative thought, the concepts required to capture the rich detail of experience are readily available to any perceiver and thus there is no reason to embrace nonconceptual content. In this paper, I will not concern myself with McDowell's attack on the notion of nonconceptual content itself, but instead will be occupied only with showing that McDowell's attempt to rescue a conceptualist account of the content of experience by appealing to demonstrative concepts fails.

1. McDowell's Claim

Although a full account of nonconceptual content will require more details, for our purposes we can characterize a nonconceptual account of the representational content of experience as one which has it that an experiencing subject need not possess concepts for the properties, objects, and relations which are included in the representational content of her experience. That is, according to nonconceptualism, one can have an experience with representational content R without possessing any of the concepts which figure in a proper description of R.² Or, yet another way: To say that the representational content of an experience is nonconceptual is to say that the experiencing subject need not possess any of the concepts which we, as theorists, exercise when we state the correctness conditions of that experience. It is important to point out that nonconceptualism should not be taken to imply that for a subject to have an experience with the nonconceptual representational content R, she must not possess any of the concepts which correspond to features included in R. Nor should it be thought that if she ever did come to possess concepts for those features, the content of

her experience would somehow change from a nonconceptual to a conceptual sort. Nonconceptualism is a thesis about what determines the representational content of experience, and thus there is nothing barring a perceiver from possessing concepts which correspond to features included in the content of her experience. Those concepts, however, would have no role in determining the representational content of her experience.

A conceptualist account of the content of experience, of course, takes the view opposite that of nonconceptualism - one's having an experience with representational content R demands that she possess the concepts used to state the correctness conditions for that content. One's experience of the world, therefore, is constrained by her conceptual capacities. Lacking the concepts which figure in a proper description of R, a perceiver could not have an experience with the representational content R. Thus, if two perceivers were looking at the same scene in the same viewing conditions, but they each possessed different concepts for the features present in the scene (or perhaps one of them lacks altogether concepts for some of the scene's features), they would have visual experiences with different representational contents.

There are two distinct varieties of nonconceptualist positions: those which claim that the representational content of experience is entirely nonconceptual (which is the position held by Evans (1982)) and those which take the representational content of experience to have both conceptual and nonconceptual properties (Peacocke (1992) is an example of someone who takes such a view). It is also open for one to claim that not only does experience have a nonconceptual representational content, but that there is

also a nonconceptual nonrepresentational content to experience (Peacocke would fall in this group, as well). Conceptualists, such as McDowell (1994), take the representational content of experience to be entirely conceptual, and thus the notion of nonconceptual content has no role at all to play in their account of the representational content of experience.

As was noted at the outset, one of the principal motivations for opting for a nonconceptualist account is that there seems to be a number of cases in which it is appropriate to attribute to a subject experiences with contents for which she lacks the corresponding concepts, particularly for the determinate values of features which are presented in her experience. In response to the case made on behalf of nonconceptualism based on the fine-grained nature of experience, McDowell has argued that although we do not possess in advance concepts for all of the determinate values of the features presented in our experience (viz., RED₂₁ for red₂₁ or SWEET₁₅ for sweet₁₅),³ this introduces no special problem for a conceptual account of the content of experience. Our capacity for demonstrative thought is supposed to allow us to pick out the features of our experience for which we otherwise lack concepts. Of course, there would seem to be a minimum requirement on the robustness of detail that must be included in the content of the demonstrative. Clearly, the representational content of experience must not be drained of the level of detail which is actually present. For example, it will not do to say that simply uttering or thinking “that” while attending to the spatial region in which a feature is experienced as being suffices for a conceptual

representation of an experience's fine-grain. Something else is required to pin down exactly what feature is being indicated by the demonstrative.

McDowell, of course, seems well aware of such a requirement and instead claims that it is the pairing of the capacity for demonstrative thought with the possession of general concepts for the features presented in experience which is supposed to provide one with all the conceptual resources required to capture the rich detail of her experience. To illustrate this, McDowell asks us to take as an example the case of color experience:

It is possible to acquire the concept of a shade of colour, and most of us have done so. . . . In the throes of an experience of the kind that putatively transcends one's conceptual powers - an experience that *ex hypothesi* affords a suitable sample - one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like "that shade", in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of the sample.⁴

So, when attending to the features presented in my visual experience of the red wall before me, which looks (say) red₂₁, for which I have no concept RED₂₁, I can still conceptually express the fine-grained nature of my color experience by saying or thinking "The wall of my office is *that* shade of red" or "*That* shade of red is rather warm." McDowell contends that such ways of picking out the wide variety of features presented in our color experiences are always available to us, and that they suffice for a conceptual representation of the detail of our color experience.

Presumably, the case of color experience can be extended to the diverse range of features which are presented in one's experience through her different sensory modalities, so that we end up using demonstrative expressions such as 'that figure', 'that scent', and 'that texture' to capture even the finest grain of our experience. For McDowell's maneuver to work, though, the demonstrative abilities in question will have to turn out to be genuine conceptual capacities which are shared by all experiencing creatures, and they will have to be shown to actually play a role in the determination of the content of experience. We will soon see that there is good reason to doubt whether either is the case.

McDowell himself points out that one of the things which must be so if we are to have on our hands a conceptual capacity that can be counted as adequately capturing the experiential features in question is that "the very same capacity to embrace a colour in mind can persist beyond the duration of the experience itself. . . . if only for a short time."⁵ That is, the capacity to identify something by means of a demonstrative expression as being an instance of a particular feature cannot be isolated to the experience in which that demonstrative is first exercised. Fundamental to our understanding of the concepts employed in reflection upon experiences is that they allow us to categorize the features presented in our experiences in useful ways, especially in ways that permit us to compare and contrast between past and current experiences, and likely also in ways that enable us to consider what future experiences might be like. This would seem to require something like the following:

(DC) For a subject *S* to have acquired a demonstrative concept *D* for feature *F*, *S* must not only be able to use *D* to identify things as exemplifying *F* at time t_0 when the original sample is presented, but *S* must also be able to deploy *D* in her reasoning and use it to recognize other samples as exemplifying *F* at some time t_n sufficiently beyond t_0 .

Obviously, much here hangs on what we are to make of McDowell's claim that the capacity can endure for a "short time", and thus what we are to count as a sufficient duration of a recognitional capacity. Although there is on hand no clear metric which we could use to determine whether such a capacity has endured long enough to count as legitimately recognitional, it is evident that if the capacities on which McDowell relies disappear with, or immediately after, the removal of the original sample, then there simply is no reason to think that utterances or thoughts of 'that shade' have the sort of conceptual content which McDowell insists they do. If the capacities failed to last at least long enough to facilitate identification of other samples (if they were to be presented) as exemplifying the feature in question, then we could not take seriously McDowell's claim that they are *recognitional*.

2. Are the Capacities Recognitional?

Clearly, there is a conceptual content of some sort to thoughts and utterances such as 'The wall is that shade'. What is at issue, however, is whether the conceptual capacities exercised in such thoughts and utterances are of a sort that can be truly counted as recognitional. That the capacities should turn out to be recognitional is

important to an evaluation of McDowell's position, because if the ability of a subject to employ the demonstrative 'that shade' to pick out a shade, such as red_{21} , for which she otherwise has no matching concept is to count as a genuine conception of that shade (i.e., as a suitable stand-in for RED_{21}), one of the things that must be so is that that ability gives its possessor the further ability to recognize other things as exemplifying the same feature as the sample to which the demonstrative was originally used to refer. If it turns out that the demonstrative abilities to which McDowell appeals cannot provide the basis for some future identification of samples as being red_{21} , then whatever conceptual content 'that shade' might have, it is not of the sort needed to figure in a conceptualist account of the content of experience. In that case, perhaps we might say that one has a concept which refers to red_{21} , but not any real concept of red_{21} . Thus she would not have at her disposal matching concepts for all of the features of her experience, which runs squarely against the conceptualist's thesis. In what follows, when I claim that the capacities appealed to by McDowell are not conceptual, I do not mean to be saying that there is no conceptual content at all to uses of 'that shade', I simply mean that the conceptual capacities at work in such uses are not of the recognitional sort required by a conceptualist account.

If one reflects on everyday color experience, she can easily observe that identification of samples based on the demonstrative abilities appealed to by McDowell would usually not endure for very long after removal of the original sample, surely not long enough for us to suppose that a recognitional capacity is at work. A trip down to the local hardware store to buy a can of paint is all that is needed to show that this is so.

Take with you to the store a sample of a paint you wish to match and study it as closely as you like, attending to even its most subtle features. While doing so, think to yourself the McDowellian “I want to buy a can of paint of *that shade*” while pointing towards the sample. Right before you go to pick out the can of paint you will purchase, put the sample in your pocket so that it is out of view. Speaking from personal experience, if one happens to choose a can having in it the right shade of paint, it is a product of mere chance - given two cans which contain paints of similar, but not identical, shades, it is doubtful that the demonstrative abilities of which McDowell speaks would be of any use in determining which is the correct one to purchase. Perhaps, after the appropriate training, one could acquire the ability to discriminate between certain shades without a sample being present, but that is of no help to McDowell, for we continue to have experiences with determinate features even in the absence of such training. In fact, the marked brevity of the normal duration of the capacities makes it seem inappropriate to think of them as being in any way *recognitional*. Thus it is dubious to suppose that these capacities satisfy (DC), and they are therefore unable to aid a conceptualist account.

There is also some doubt whether all experiencing creatures command the same sort of abilities with which McDowell is concerned. I certainly do not share McDowell’s confidence that all, or even most, experiencing creatures possess the sort of general concepts his maneuver requires that they do. Take, for example, his use of the concept of a shade of a color, which he claims “most of us” have acquired. Even if we grant that the class of experiencing creatures is restricted to rationally mature human beings, this

seems quite inaccurate. The inability of most people to make distinctions between variations in hue, color, shade, and saturation makes it abundantly clear that “most of us” do not have a robust conception of a shade of a color. Perhaps it could be successfully argued that we can get by with incomplete concepts of such features. However, there still seems to be no difficulty in imagining creatures who are otherwise conceptually-sophisticated, but who, in reflection upon their color experience, have somehow managed to not acquire a conception of shade (although they might have acquired concepts for other features of their color experiences), yet experience colors in the same sorts of ways that we do. Perhaps even some of our fellow human beings are actually in this situation. Thus, at least in some cases, different general concepts will have to be used by different perceivers to capture the determinate features presented in their experience.

Once we have recognized the possibility that not all experiencing creatures share the general concepts McDowell thinks they do, the door is open for cases which show that the appeal to demonstrative thought does not provide the conceptualist with the means required to deal with the challenge presented by the rich detail of experience.

Christopher Peacocke (1998) offers the following example against McDowell:

Perhaps McDowell would say that we must just take the most specific concept in the repertoire of the perceiver to capture the fine-grained content. This would imply that the fine-grained representational content of experience of two people, neither of whom has the general concept “shade”, but one of which has the

concept “scarlet”, and the other of whom has only “red” but not “scarlet”, would differ at the finest-grained level.⁶

Such a result is not acceptable - if two subjects, who are similar except that there are some differences in which color concepts each possesses, are both looking at the same sample in the same viewing conditions, surely their visual experiences represent the color of the sample in the same way, particularly at the finest-grained level. It is certainly odd to suppose that two subjects’ experiences must differ at the finest-grained level because they do not share the same concepts. Also, any representational differences which might arise at the conceptual level should be attributed only to differences in the cognitive resources available to each, and are not the result of a difference in how their experiences represent the world. Their ability to exercise different, but overlapping, concepts in attending to the detail of their experience looks to be grounded in their experiencing the same shade in the same way.

Even for perceivers who share the same general concepts, differences in their more specific concepts could bring about differences in the fine-grained representational content of their experiences. Suppose two people share SHADE, but one, and only one, of them also has SHADE OF RED. Why think that in conceptually capturing the fine-grained detail of her color experience of an object which is scarlet, a perceiver having both SHADE and SHADE OF RED would always choose the former (“... is that shade”) rather than the latter (“... is that shade of red”)? There is at least a good deal of plausibility to thinking that a subject would use the most specific concept on hand to capture the fine-grained detail of her experience. Even if she does not

always do so, there is no reason to doubt that in some cases she would. Thus in a situation in which both perceivers were viewing the same red wall in the same viewing conditions, it is possible that they would differ at the finest-grained level in the conceptual contents of their experiences. If one is thinking “The wall is that shade” and the other is thinking “The wall is that shade of red”, their experiences would have different conceptual contents, which the conceptualist cannot allow.

Prompted by objections of this sort, McDowell (1998) has slightly revised his original proposal. Instead of making use of expressions such as “that shade” and “that figure”, which have to do with concepts of colors and shapes (and other features) themselves, McDowell now concerns himself with “concepts of ways ordinary visible things can be and seen as being.”⁷ To capture the rich detail of color experience, we are to now use demonstrative expressions such as “. . . is colored thus” and “. . . is shaped thus.” Once again, the idea is that although a subject may lack concepts which match the determinate features presented in her experience (e.g., RED₂₁ for red₂₁), she can still conceptually capture the fine-grained nature of her experience through the deployment of a general concept in a demonstrative expression. The crucial difference between McDowell’s revision and his original proposal is supposed to be that the general concepts appealed to the first time were not of the sort which we could expect all experiencers to command, but now that the focus has been placed on the ways things can be (say) colored or shaped, the concepts used are general enough that they can be possessed by all experiencing subjects (once again, so long as we restrict the class of experiencing creatures to those which have at least a moderately developed conceptual

repertoire). Perhaps it is at least reasonable to think that all of us have on hand the conceptual resources required for thoughts such as “. . . is colored thus” and “. . . is shaped thus.”

It is rather doubtful that McDowell’s revised proposal will afford him a successful means of response to objections such as the one owing to Peacocke cited above. First, there is still a question about which concept to choose from for perceivers with rich conceptual resources, which brings us back to the objection raised just before. Why suppose that a perceiver having both COLORED and COLORED RED would always choose the former concept (“. . . is colored thus”) rather than the latter (“. . . is colored red thus”) to capture the detail of her color experience? Certainly there would be cases in which a subject would choose to use the most specific concept available to pick out the determinate features of her color experience. This seems to land us right back in the same undesirable situation as before. Two perceivers looking at the same sample in the same viewing conditions, one of which has both COLORED and COLORED RED, and the other of which has only COLORED, would (or, at least, could) have experiences with conceptual contents which differ at the finest-grained level.

In order to block this objection, McDowell would need an argument to the effect that, no matter how rich any particular perceiver’s conceptual stockpile might be, there is a certain level of generality from which all perceivers choose the concepts they deploy when capturing the rich detail of their experiences by means of a demonstrative expression. Or, perhaps, McDowell could argue that there is a certain level of generality from which are drawn the concepts that figure in a canonical characterization

of a perceiver's experiences. Thus, so long as everyone possessed the appropriate general concepts, the fact that some perceivers have richer conceptual repertoires than others would present no special problem to conceptualism. However, McDowell certainly offers no such argument. Further, given the great deal of intuitive plausibility attached to the claims that in the normal course of things a perceiver will use the most specific concepts available to pick out the determinate features of her experiences and that a canonical characterization of an experience's content will include concepts as fine in grain as required to accurately describe that content, I do not see how such an argument could prove successful.

McDowell's revision also offers no defense at all against the objection that the capacities to which he appeals are not in any legitimate sense *recognitional*, and thus not appropriately conceptual. If one were to go back down to the paint store with her sample and, instead of thinking to herself "I wish to buy a can of paint of *that shade*," thinks to herself "I wish to buy a can of paint *colored thus*," the results would surely be the same as before - her ability to pick something out based on her demonstrative thought directed towards the original sample will disappear very soon, if not immediately, after that sample is removed. Even if the capacity manages to survive for a moment or two beyond the removal of the sample, it certainly does not last long enough to be of use in recognizing other samples of the same shade, and thus there is no reason to take the demonstrative to have the sort of conceptual content McDowell claims that it does.

3. Some McDowellian Responses

There are a few avenues McDowell and those sympathetic to him might explore in response to the objections just raised, particularly regarding the attack on the claim that the demonstrative concepts appealed to are recognitional. The most promising means of response would be to argue that if the attack succeeds, it establishes *too* much. If I can show that demonstrative concepts do not provide the resources required to conceptually capture the fine-grained detail of experience, why does that also not show that one does not have a genuine thought when exercising such concepts? If 'that shade of red' is not adequate for figuring in a conceptual representation of the content of one's experience, it is unclear how it could serve in the representational content of a thought about one's experience. But, there is no denying that we do have genuine demonstrative thoughts about features presented in our experiences, so something must have gone wrong somewhere in our reasoning.

What makes this not a problem for the nonconceptualist is the distinction between a thought about red₂₃ as red₂₃ (i.e., a red₂₃-thought) and a thought about red₂₃ under some other aspect. You do not come to have a red₂₃-thought simply by exercising the demonstrative 'that shade of red' when thinking about the red₂₃ patch before you. In order to have a demonstrative thought about red₂₃ as red₂₃, you need to have not only the concepts RED and SHADE (which you must have to exercise the demonstrative in the first place), you also require the appropriate recognitional capacity for red₂₃. There is nothing barring you, however, from having a genuine demonstrative thought about the red₂₃ patch in the absence of a recognitional capacity for red₂₃ (so

long as you have RED and SHADE), but that thought will merely be a shade-of-red-thought. The content of such a demonstrative will be too coarse-grained to capture the determinate nature of your color experience, but there is no difficulty in supposing that 'that shade of red' allows for thought about red₂₃ under some aspect, even if it is not under a red₂₃ aspect. For a non-experiential example, I may lack the concept BEAGLE and thus be unable to think about my neighbor's beagle as a beagle, but if I have the more general concept DOG, I can still think about his beagle under another aspect; i.e., I can have dog-thoughts about my neighbor's beagle, but not beagle-thoughts about it.

However, in visually experiencing the red₂₃ patch before you, you *ipso facto* (supposing there are no interfering factors) have a red₂₃-experience. Thus if the conceptualist's thesis is to hold, one of the requirements which needs to be met is that you possess either RED₂₃ or a suitable stand-in for it (i.e., a concept which allows you to pick out red₂₃ as red₂₃). As has been noted, few, if any, of us could be expected to have determinate concepts such as RED₂₃, yet we continue to have red₂₃-experiences. So, the conceptualist needs to come up with some other concept which allows one to pick out red₂₃ as red₂₃. Both the preceding section and the last paragraph make clear, however, that although demonstrative concepts, which appear to be the last hope for conceptualism, allow us to think about the determinate features of our experiences, they do not represent with the fineness of grain that the conceptualist's thesis requires.

The obvious McDowellian response to this maneuver would be to question why we should individuate experiences in a more fine-grained way than demonstrative thought allows. Perhaps McDowell would contend that the following sort of case

demonstrates that demonstrative concepts do allow us to capture the determinate nature of experience, despite the arguments to the contrary which have already been presented.

When simultaneously viewing two items which are experienced as being different shades of red, I can give expression to the difference in the determinate values of redness each looks to have by use of a demonstrative. I can simply say, “That shade of red (while ostending towards one of the items) is different from that shade of red (while ostending towards the other item).”⁸ Clearly, that is sufficient for capturing the relevant fine-grained differences between the experiences of those different shades.

I do not wish to argue against the claim that demonstrative concepts can be used to capture *differences* in detail when items are experienced at the same time. However, it is a further issue, and one which is central to conceptualism’s survival, whether demonstrative concepts can always capture in a sufficiently fine-grained way the detail actually present in the representational content of experience.

To show that the proposed conceptualist maneuver is defective, consider the differently shaded items experienced in isolation at different times. Suppose that I am at my office one morning and, at time t_0 , notice on the wall out in the hallway a fire-safety sticker which is red_{21} . I do not have RED_{21} , but I think to myself, “The sticker is that shade of red.” After returning home for lunch, I go out to my mailbox and, at t_1 , see a red envelope sticking out. The envelope is red_{23} , for which I also lack a corresponding concept, so I say to myself, “The envelope is that shade of red.”

Suddenly, I remember seeing earlier that morning the fire-safety sticker on the wall outside my office, which I remember as looking to be a shade of red similar to that of the envelope. Being a rather inquisitive sort, I begin to question whether they are the same shade of red. I say to myself something to the effect of, “I wonder whether that shade of red (of the envelope) is the same as that shade of red (of the sticker).” As the earlier paint store example illustrates, my stored memory image of the shade of the fire-safety sticker, although it might allow me to recognize that the shade of the sticker is close to that of the envelope, is not sharp enough to serve as the basis of a decisive judgment about whether or not the two items share the same shade. So, when I leave for my office after lunch, I bring the envelope with me, so that I can compare the two shades side-by-side.

Once at my office, I walk out into the hall and hold the envelope up next to the sticker, and it is immediately apparent that they do not look to be the same shade. On the basis of my visual experience at this time (t_2), I say to myself, “That shade of red (of the sticker) is different from that shade of red (of the envelope).” This should lead us to conclude that there is a difference in how the shade of the sticker is presented in my experience and how the shade of the envelope is presented, otherwise my judgment about their difference would not be possible. But, why suppose that such a difference, a representational difference, was not already in place prior to the simultaneous comparison? The experiences at t_0 and t_1 should then be considered different in type; the former would be a red_{21} -experience, and the latter a red_{23} -experience. If the demonstratives exercised at those times truly captured the fine-grained detail actually

present in my experiences, then what explains my not being able to tell on the basis of my experience at t_1 whether or not the envelope and the sticker look to be the same shade? With the demonstrative thoughts at t_0 and t_1 , all I end up with are two thoughts which, although they refer to different shades of red, cannot be used to pick them out as different shades of red. My inability to make a determination of their identity or nonidentity solely on the basis of my isolated experiences shows this. The thoughts at t_0 and t_1 , therefore, are type-classified at a different level of determinateness than the experiences of red_{21} and red_{23} ; they are “merely” shade-of-red-thoughts. Although there are cases in which demonstratives allow us to make discriminations among the features presented in our experience, that is not always so. In the normal course of things, we rarely have the luxury of making a simultaneous comparison. Thus there still is no reason to suppose that demonstrative concepts provide the resources required for the conceptualist to account for the rich detail found in the representational content of experience.

4. From Nonconceptual Content to Conceptual Content

Further troubling for McDowell’s conceptualism is that, even if all of the preceding objections failed and the demonstrative capacities appealed to turned out to be both recognitional and sharable by all experiencing creatures, he has still offered us no reason to suppose that they in fact have a role in determining the representational content of perceptual experience. That we always have available the ability to conceptually represent to ourselves in thought even the finest-grained detail of the

features presented in our experience by itself does not guarantee that the representational content of experience is itself conceptual. The way McDowell himself puts things betrays this shortcoming:

In the presence of the original sample, “that shade” can give expression to a concept of a shade. . . . What is in play here is a recognitional capacity, possibly quite short-lived, that sets in with the experience. It is the conceptual content of such a recognitional capacity that can be made explicit with the help of a sample, something that is guaranteed to be available at the time of the experience with which the capacity sets in.⁹

Possession of the particular demonstrative concept deployed when having an experience which otherwise extends beyond one’s conceptual resources does not look to be antecedent to the experience itself. Instead, it seems that the ability to form the demonstrative in question depends on having already been presented with a suitable sample in experience. Without the experience, it would seem, the demonstrative would not have been available.

If this is so, I do not see how the demonstrative concepts with which McDowell is concerned could figure in determining the representational content of experience. By itself, the fact that concepts which correspond to the features presented in one’s experience “set in” with her experience does not suffice for showing that one could not have had the particular experience she had if she did not possess those concepts, and thus it has not been shown that a conceptualist account is true. Clearly, the capacity for demonstrative thought gives a subject the conceptual resources required to reflect upon

features of her experience for which she otherwise lacks concepts, but that is not what McDowell's conceptualist account of the content of experience requires. All that McDowell says about demonstrative concepts seems perfectly consistent with the sort of view put forth by Gareth Evans, that in making judgments based on perceptual experience, we move from being in a state with nonconceptual content to a state having conceptual content.¹⁰

Experiences seem to have their representational content independent of a subject's possessing McDowell's demonstrative concepts, and the demonstratives simply provide a means of embracing in thought, at varying degrees of determinateness, the features presented in one's experience. At most, his discussion of demonstrative concepts establishes that the features of a subject's experience could always be matched by a concept possessed by the subject, but that does not show that for an experience to have the content it has requires that the subject possess a particular (demonstrative) concept, which is what any conceptualist account requires be the case. In fact, McDowell's maneuver looks to have a result completely opposite to what was intended - it seems to indicate that the content of a subject's experience is independent of her conceptual stockpile and that a subject's possession of at least some of her concepts (such as the demonstrative concepts to which he appeals) is to be grounded in the concept-independent representational content of experience. Thus McDowell's appeal to demonstrative concepts has given us no reason to reject a nonconceptualist account of the representational content of experience in favor of a conceptualist one.¹¹

5. Notes

¹ Hereafter, simply ‘nonconceptual content’.

² By a “proper” description, I have in mind something along the lines of Cussins’ (1990) “canonical characterization, relative to a theory” (pp.382-3).

³ I adopt the practice of capitalizing entirely words that are used to refer to concepts.

⁴ McDowell (1994), pp.56-7.

⁵ McDowell (1994), p.57.

⁶ Peacocke (1998), p.382.

⁷ McDowell (1998), p.404.

⁸ One could also formulate a similar statement based on McDowell’s “is colored thus”.

⁹ McDowell (1994), p.57.

¹⁰ See Evans (1982), p.227.

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