

DEFINING AND DEFENDING NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENTS AND STATES

Discussions of whether perceptual states have nonconceptual content typically define the issue in a way that is bound to be confusing to anyone entering the debate for the first time—they conflate questions about the nature of contents *per se* with questions about the requirements on perceivers if they are to be in states with those contents. My principal aim in what follows is to provide a more perspicuous way of setting up the issue, building on work by Speaks, Byrne, and Crowther. My secondary aim is to sharpen and endorse one of the arguments for the nonconceptuality of perceptual states—the argument from experience as a source of concepts.

I

I begin with a sampling of definitions of nonconceptual content:

To say that a mental content is nonconceptual is to say that its subject need not possess any of the concepts that we, as theorists, exercise when we state the correctness conditions for that content. (Tye 2000, 62)

Those who hold that there is non-conceptual content maintain that there are mental states which represent the world, even though their subject lacks the concepts that would enable her to specify that content. (Gendler and Hawthorne 2006, 14)

The central idea behind the theory of nonconceptual mental content is that some mental states can represent the world even though the bearer of those mental states need not possess the concepts required to specify their content. (Bermudez 2008)

The content of a state is nonconceptual if “an individual does not or cannot exercise the concepts involved in its articulation.” (Gunther 2003, 14)¹

¹ This is actually one of three possible conditions listed by Gunther. One of the others—“it cannot be represented conceptually”—does not have the confusing feature I focus on here.

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 characterize P. (Crane 1992, 143) . . . (T) o say that concepts are not components of contents is to say that the subject does not have to possess the concepts used to characterize the content in order for his or her state to have such a content. (Crane 1992, 155)

A mental state has [non]conceptual content iff [it is not the case that] “it has a representational content which is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself possesses” and which has a form enabling it to serve as an inference. (Brewer 2005, 217-18)²

I mention one feature of these definitions only to set it aside for now. All of the definitions make mention in their definienda of the concepts that *characterize* a certain content or that would enable one to *specify* the content or the like; they do not make mention of the concepts that *figure in* or are *constituents of* the content. Is a distinction intended here? Not necessarily; many writers on nonconceptual content, including some of those quoted above, explicitly identify the concepts that characterize a content with the concepts that compose it or are constituents of it.³ I shall return below to the possibility of distinguishing characterizing concepts from constituent concepts.

The feature of the definitions on which I wish to concentrate is something else. All of them purport to define nonconceptuality as a property of *contents*, yet in their definienda, they seem to formulate what is more properly (at least in the first instance) a feature of a *state* of a subject or of a subject's *relation* to a content. The linguistic marker of this apparent disconnect between definiendum and definiens is that all of the definitions make

² As the brackets indicate, I have replaced Brewer's definition of conceptual content by the definition of its complement.

³ I believe this is true of Crane 1992 and Byrne 2005..

mention on the right side of a subject of experience, but this subject is nowhere in evidence on the left.

That something is askew with the standard definitions has been noted by several recent writers, all of whom have suggested that the definitions conflate two distinct notions of conceptuality and nonconceptuality. To rectify this situation, Byrne (2005, following Heck 2000) distinguishes between the conceptuality or nonconceptuality of *states* and that of *contents*; Speaks (2005) distinguishes between *relatively* and *absolutely* conceptual or nonconceptual content; and Crowther (2006) distinguishes between *possessional* and *compositional* conceptual or nonconceptual content.⁴ Each of these three writers observes that definitions like those quoted above mash together the two sides of his distinction—they use in their definienda language apt for the expression of a notion on one side of the distinction, but in their definientia language more suited for a notion on the other side, making a muddle of the issue. Byrne, Speaks, and Crowther also note that typical arguments purporting to establish conclusions about nonconceptuality in the content, absolute, or compositional sense may in fact only reach conclusions about nonconceptuality in the state, relativized, or possessional sense. If they are right about this, their distinctions certainly matter.

As I noted above, the standard definitions all make mention of a subject on the right that is nowhere in evidence on the left. To see why this is a problem (and to make it

⁴ Some of these authors make their distinctions in regard to the *doctrines* of conceptualism or nonconceptualism. I think it is more perspicuous to make them first for the *properties* of being conceptual or nonconceptual; one may then go on to explain the doctrines in terms of the properties. I suggest one way of doing this in the appendix.

stand out more starkly), let us note that there would be a *logical* defect in a definition of the following form:

State M with content p has nonconceptual content iff S can be in M even though S does not possess the concepts in p.

The defect is that the variable ‘S’ has free occurrences on the right, but no occurrences at all on the left.⁵ The same defect is present in the definition ‘n is a superior number iff n is greater than m’, where ‘m’ is a free variable.

There are three ways to rectify this situation. We could (1) *remove* the variable S on the right, (2) *add* a corresponding variable on the left, or (3) do neither of these things, but *quantify* the variable on the right. The attempts of the authors I have cited to bring further clarity to the notion of nonconceptual content may all be viewed (though none of them is explicit about it) as employing one or another of these three strategies.

The “remove on the right” strategy has been employed by all three of the reformers in characterizing one pole of the distinction they wish to draw. Thus Speaks defines what he calls *absolutely* nonconceptual content as follows:

A mental state has *absolutely nonconceptual content* iff that mental state has a different kind of content than do beliefs, thoughts, and so on. (360)

Byrne does something similar; he says that for a content to be nonconceptual in the sense in which nonconceptuality is a property of contents themselves is for it to be a content of the kind other than that possessed by beliefs (233).

Crowther offers something potentially different, but equivalent for anyone who thinks belief contents are Fregean:

⁵ A definition with exactly this defect occurs on p. 149 in Crane. There may be tacit quantifiers binding his subject variable, but he does not say what they are or how they are to be placed.

p is a (compositionally) conceptual content iff p is composed exclusively of concepts. (250).⁶ [Correlatively, p is a (compositionally) nonconceptual content iff it is not the case that p is composed exclusively of concepts.]

Crowther explains further that concepts are Fregean senses, individuated in such a way that C is a sense iff for some concept D coextensive with C, it is possible for someone in whom the question arises to believe that . . . C . . . while doubting or disbelieving the corresponding proposition that . . . D⁷ His definition is more committal than those of Speaks and Byrne, but it would come to the same thing as theirs for anyone who held that the contents of belief are Fregean propositions, built up from Fregean concepts—an assumption that Crowther says is common ground for most parties to the conceptual-nonconceptual debate.

What happens to the debate about nonconceptual content if the objects of belief are held to be either Russellian propositions (structures consisting of individuals and properties) or Stalnakerian propositions (sets of possible worlds)? Stalnakerian propositions, if held to be not merely determined by sets of worlds but identical with them, are composed of worlds rather than concepts. Russellian propositions are not composed *exclusively* of concepts, since they have individuals as constituents, and perhaps they are not composed even *partly* of concepts, if concepts are individuated more finely than properties. How, then, should we classify perceptual contents in the view of

⁶ Crowther's actual words are 'Where S has an experience , e, with the content p, p is a [compositionally] conceptual content if p is composed of concepts'. I presume that his 'if' is a typo for 'iff', since his definition of the complementary concept uses an 'iff'. The 'where' clause is inessential, as what follows does not depend on it. It is clear from Crowther's surrounding commentary that the word 'exclusively' should be inserted after 'composed'.

⁷ What he actually says is "someone in whom the question arises may believe (where F is some completing content) that C is F, while rationally doubting or disbelieving that D is F, though 'C' and 'D' are co-referring terms" (250). It is clear, however, that he wants his characterization of senses to apply whether they occur in subject or predicate place in a proposition, so I have used a more general formulation.

someone who takes perceptual contents and belief contents alike to be Russellian propositions, or who takes both alike to be Stalnakerian propositions? Are such perceptual contents conceptual or nonconceptual? Byrne and Speaks would classify them as conceptual, since they have the same type of content as beliefs. Crowther would classify them as nonconceptual, since they are not composed exclusively of concepts.

For the purposes of this paper, I am going to side with Crowther. It is desirable to have an intrinsic characterization of what it is for a content to be conceptual or nonconceptual—one we can apply independently of what we have antecedently decided about the contents of beliefs.⁸

By getting rid of the reference to a subject on the right, the definitions of Byrne, Speaks, and Crowther do define a property that is a property of contents themselves. However, the same is not true of the definitions one typically sees. If we retain a reference to a subject on the right (as the typical definitions do), we need to use one of the other strategies for avoiding the logical defect.

The “add on the left” strategy has been employed by Speaks in formulating what he calls the *relativized* notion of nonconceptual content:

A mental state has *nonconceptual content relative to agent A* at a time *t* iff the content of that mental state includes concepts not grasped (possessed) by A at *t*. (360)⁹

⁸ It is a peculiarity of the Byrne-Speaks definition of conceptuality that if someone held that the contents of perception are composed of Fregean concepts while the contents of belief are Stalnakerian propositions, the perceptual contents would count as nonconceptual despite being composed of concepts.

⁹ I have made two changes from Speaks’s own formulation, which is this: “A mental state of an agent A (at a time *t*) has relatively nonconceptual content iff the content of that mental state includes contents not grasped (possessed) by A at *t*.” I have rearranged the terms in his definiendum to highlight the relativized character of the definition. I have also replaced the third occurrence of his ‘content’ by ‘concept’. I presume he uses ‘content’ instead of ‘concept’ because he wants to count some nonFregean propositions as conceptual contents, but they do not contain any concepts to be grasped or not by a subject.

Here we do not speak of nonconceptual content *simpliciter*, but only of nonconceptual content relative to this or that agent, now explicitly mentioned on the left.¹⁰

For an application of the distinction between the absolute and the relativized notions, we may look at what Speaks has to say about one of the arguments for holding that perceptual states have nonconceptual content—the argument from animal perception, which runs as follows:

1. Some animals possess no concepts at all (or hardly any).
2. They nonetheless enjoy some perceptual states with the same contents as some of our own perceptual states.
3. Therefore, some perceptual states of humans have nonconceptual content.

Speaks rightly notes that it does not follow from these premises that any human perceptual states have nonconceptual content in the absolute sense. For all that has been said, it could be that the content of the states in question is absolutely conceptual, even though animals need not grasp the concepts in the content to be in states having that content. In that case, the premises would be true and the conclusion false (if taken to be about absolutely nonconceptual content). We could nonetheless allow, says Speaks, that the following argument for *relatively* nonconceptual content is valid:

1. Animals can be in state M without grasping the concepts included in its content.
2. Humans cannot be in state M without grasping those concepts.

¹⁰ A relativized notion of nonconceptual content is also presupposed in the following sentence from Tye 2006, even though the definition he uses in that article does not make any relativization explicit: “For what makes the content nonconceptual for subject S is simply the fact that S need not herself have the relevant concepts and thus need not herself be in a position to form the relevant thought” (207). The definition he uses runs thus: “a visual experience E has a nonconceptual content if and only if (i) E has correctness conditions; (ii) the subject of E need not possess the concepts used in a canonical specification of E’s correctness conditions” (207). Though he recognizes that the definiens does not really tell us anything about the conceptuality or nonconceptuality of the content itself, he nonetheless retains the old misleading language of nonconceptual content in the definiendum.

3. Therefore, M has nonconceptual content for animals, but not for humans.¹¹

Speaks's distinction is certainly of value in enabling us to see what does and does not follow from the premises of the argument from animal perception. However, it seems to me that the terminology he uses to express his distinction is horribly misleading. It suggests (what Speaks by no means wishes to say) that the content of a given state can be of one sort (the conceptual kind) for some subjects while the same content is of another kind (the nonconceptual kind) for other subjects. How odd!

The 1-2-3 argument in the previous paragraph (which is valid given the way Speaks defines the relativized sense of nonconceptual content) may be compared with the following argument (whose formal parallelism with the original does not at all depend on whether grasping concepts is anything like grasping handlebars):

1. Tommy can ride his bike without grasping its handlebars.
2. His grandmother cannot ride Tommy's bike without grasping its handlebars.
3. Therefore, the bike has nonhandlebar content for Tommy, but not for his grandmother.

Surely Tommy's bike does not have one kind of content for Tommy and a different kind for Grandmother—it is the same bike with the same parts no matter who rides it.¹² What is true is simply that Tommy and his grandmother have different requirements for riding the bicycle. Similarly, perceptual states do not have contents of one kind for animals and

¹¹ See Speaks, 362 and 366. I have not employed precisely his formulation of the argument, but it is clear from his discussion that he would agree that the premises imply that M has nonconceptual content relative to animals while lacking nonconceptual content relative to humans.

¹² Even if we can attach sense to the notion of nonhandlebar content (e.g., the bike must have pedals or a seat for Tommy to ride it without using the handlebars), the bike has that same content for Grandmother.

of another kind for humans. The entire issue is misleadingly framed when framed as an issue about a subject-relative kind of content.

For the foregoing reason, I prefer the quantificational strategy to the relativizing strategy for dealing with the problem of the variable that occurs only on the right. This strategy is implicitly employed by Byrne. He gives a preliminary definition of one notion of nonconceptuality as follows:

Mental state M has nonconceptual content p iff it is possible to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p. (2005, 233)

He then rightly notes that the definiens does not seem to define a kind of content but rather a kind of state one can be in with regard to a content. So he alters the definiendum to suit:

State M with content p is a *nonconceptual state* iff it is possible to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p.

‘It is possible to be in M’ is presumably elliptical for ‘it is possible for *someone* to be in M’, so we may expand Byrne’s definition of a nonconceptual state as follows:

State M with content p is a *nonconceptual state* iff it is possible for someone to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p.

This is Byrne’s definition of nonconceptuality for states (as opposed to contents).

In this definition, there is no stray variable on the right; the variable has been lassoed by a quantifier. In symbols, the definiens may be rendered as ‘ $\diamond\exists S(S \text{ is in } M \ \& \ \text{it is not the case that } S \text{ possesses all the concepts that characterize } p)$ ’. We could also have remedied the problem of the stray variable by using a *universal* quantifier: it is possible for *anyone* to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p. Perhaps

that would define a notion of nonconceptuality worth exploring. Yet another option, if we take seriously such phrases as ‘*the* subject’ as they occur on the right sides of some definitions of nonconceptual content, would be to use an iota operator or definite description-forming operator rather than a quantifier as our variable-binding operator. Our definition would then read ‘state M with content p is a nonconceptual state iff *the* S such that S is the subject of M need not have all the concepts that characterize p’. This definition would not be apposite, of course, if we mean to be talking about state types, for there is not just one subject of a given state type.¹³

The Byrne definiens for state conceptuality, unlike the Speaks definiens for relativized conceptual content, formulates a monadic property—a property that can be ascribed to a state by itself and not simply to a state in relation to a subject. It may be compared with the formula ‘ $\exists y(x \text{ is the father of } y)$ ’, which expresses a monadic property of x even though the formula ‘x is the father of y’ expresses a relation between x and y. It is therefore inaccurate for Speaks to distinguish the absolute sense from the state sense by saying that only the former expresses a monadic property.¹⁴ The property of being a nonconceptual state in Byrne’s sense is monadic, though not absolute in the Speaks sense.

Finally, let us look at Crowther’s definition of nonconceptual content in the possessional sense—his counterpart of Speaks’s nonconceptual content in the relativized sense and Byrne’s nonconceptuality in the state sense. Crowther’s definition does not

¹³ Actually, when phrases like ‘the subject’ occur in the definiens, they are more charitably taken as being symbolizable by a universal quantifier, as with ‘the whale is a mammal’. The idea would be that *whoever* is in the state could be in it without possessing the concepts that characterize p, as in the previous suggestion in the text.

¹⁴ See 359-60, where Speaks says the absolute sense expresses a monadic property whereas the relative sense does not, and note 5, in which he equates his relative sense with the state sense of Heck and Byrne.

quite fit any of my three molds for dealing with the problem of the extra variable; perhaps it should be accounted a fourth strategy. Here is his definition of conceptual content in the possessional sense:

If [subject] S has [experience] e with content p, p is a (possessionally) conceptual content iff in order for S to be undergoing e, S must possess all the concepts that characterize p. (252)¹⁵

The complementary definition would be

If subject S has experience e with content p, p is a (possessionally) *nonconceptual* content iff it is *not* the case that in order for S to be undergoing e, S must possess all the concepts that characterize p.

This is a conditional definition, having the overall form ‘If P, then Q iff R’, as in a Carnapian reduction sentence. There is a free variable, ‘S’, in the definiens that does not occur in the definiendum, but one cannot complain that it comes out of nowhere, since it is introduced in the antecedent clause prefixed to the definition.

I have a mild complaint about Crowther’s definition. Although his intent is to define a property that is not a property of contents themselves, he backslides by using the misleading locution ‘p is a nonconceptual content’ in formulating his definiendum. It would have been more perspicuous for him to use ‘e’ rather than ‘p’ as the variable in his definiendum, as follows:

If subject S has experience e with content p, then e is a possessionally nonconceptual experience iff in order for S to be undergoing e, S need not possess all the concepts that characterize p.

¹⁵ I have made two changes from Crowther’s actual wording. First, I have replaced Crowther’s ‘where’ clause, “Where S has an experience, e, with the content p,” by an equivalent ‘if’ clause. Second, I have inserted ‘all’ before ‘the concepts’, which is probably redundant, but in any case indicated by the context.

That would emphasize that what is nonconceptual is the *state* the subject is in; the content itself (so far as the definiens goes) might be composed of concepts.

I also have a potentially more serious complaint. What if we instantiate the conditional definition twice, once to Joe and again to his dog Fido? Joe might not be able to undergo his experience without possessing all the concepts characterizing *p*, whereas Fido can undergo an experience with the same content without having those concepts. We would then have two experiences of the same type one of which is possessionally conceptual and the other of which is possessionally nonconceptual, which sounds odd if not contradictory.

To summarize the discussion so far, we should distinguish two issues. One is about perceptual contents proper: Are they like belief contents? More fundamentally, are they composed of concepts? The other is about the relations of subjects to those contents or about the states of subjects that incorporate the contents: Does standing in the relation or being in the state require the subject to have whatever concepts characterize the content? The standard definitions of nonconceptual content muddy this distinction; they make it look as though an answer of ‘no’ to the latter question would *automatically* amount to an answer of ‘no’ to the former question. Worse, insofar as the standard definitions mention a subject of contentful states on the right that is not mentioned on the left, they run the risk of being logically defective. The best way to deal with this situation is to define one notion of nonconceptuality that applies to contents proper (without reference to subjects) and another definition of nonconceptuality that applies to states of subjects or their relations to contents. Moreover, the state sense is better captured by quantifying the

subject variable in the definiens (à la Byrne) than it is by making the notion defined relative to subjects (à la Speaks) or going conditional (à la Crowther).

II

Having distinguished between styles of definition apt for defining nonconceptuality as a property of contents proper and styles apt for defining nonconceptuality as a property of states (or of subject-content relations), we may now ask how the two types of nonconceptuality are related. Do they always go hand in hand, or can they come apart? Is it possible for a state to be conceptual despite having nonconceptual content or, conversely, for a state to be *nonconceptual* despite having a conceptual content? Crowther has argued that each of these mixed combinations is indeed possible. In this section, I examine and cast doubt on his reasons for thinking so.

Take first the question whether a state could be nonconceptual despite having a conceptual content or, in Crowther's terms, whether we could have compositional conceptuality together with possessional nonconceptuality—the combination he calls P4.

Let *M* be a perceptual state with content *p*. If *p* is a conceptual content, we have

(1) *p* is composed of concepts (there are concepts in *p*).

If *M* is a nonconceptual state, then by either Byrne's or Crowther's account, it is possible for someone to be in *M* without possessing all the concepts in *p*. So there is a possible world *w* in which someone, call him *S*, is such that

(2) *S* is in *M* & *S* does not possess all the concepts in *p*.

Now I am going to bring into the discussion a principle once propounded (though later abandoned) by Peacocke:

Peacocke's Principle: It is a conceptual truth that no one can have an experience with a given representational content unless he possesses the concepts from which the content is built up. (1983, 19)¹⁶

If this principle is correct, we can apply it to world *w* to obtain

(3) If *S* is in *M*, *S* possesses all the concepts in *p*.

We have now reached a contradiction. (2) and (3) cannot be true together, except perhaps vacuously for want of concepts in *p*, but (1) assures that there *are* concepts in *p*.

Crowther's P4 combination is not possible if Peacocke's Principle is true.

So what is the status of Peacocke's Principle—*is* it true? There is a principle in its neighborhood that would be difficult to deny, namely:

If *S* has a propositional attitude with content *p*, then *S* possesses all the concepts involved in *p*.¹⁷

This principle has fair claim to being regarded as an analytic truth. Going at it from one end, Chisholm once defined what it is for a proposition *p* to *involve* a concept *F* (that is, to have it as a constituent) as follows: *p* involves *F* iff necessarily, whoever entertains *p* entertains or grasps *F*. Obviously, you cannot entertain or grasp a concept you do not possess. Going at it from the other end, Speaks defines what it is to *possess* a concept as follows: *S* possesses *F* iff *S* is capable of thoughts involving *F*. Either of these definitions would make it analytic that if *p* involves *F*, then whoever entertains *p* possesses *F*—for Chisholm it would be analytic of involvement, and for Speaks it would

¹⁶ Crane says Peacocke changed his mind about this by 1986.

¹⁷ Compare Bermudez 2008: "It is hard to see how one can have a propositional attitude whose content is a complex of concepts without possessing each of them."

be analytic of possession.¹⁸ Since entertaining is the common core of all propositional attitudes, it follows that whoever has any propositional attitude toward *p* possesses all the concepts involved in *p*.

The principle I have just derived is not quite tantamount to Peacocke's Principle, however. It would yield Peacocke's Principle only when supplemented by the following assumption: having an experience with a given representational content *is having a propositional attitude toward that content*. So one could deny Peacocke's Principle if one also denied that having an experience that *p* is a propositional attitude—even though its content is a proposition, and even though “experiencing that” sounds like an attitude.

What is emerging, then, is that perception can be a nonconceptual state with conceptual contents *provided* that perceptual states are not propositional attitudes.¹⁹ Experiencing is not an attitude; it's an ain't-a-tude.

The natural question to ask at this point is the following: in what sense can an experience have a certain proposition as its content if the experience is not an attitude toward that propositional content? One possible suggestion is that it is a matter of the experience's having that proposition as its *informational* content, which might be analyzed further as follows: the experience is a nomologically reliable indicator of *p*'s

¹⁸ Proof for the Speaks case: Assume that *p* involves *F* (the left side of the theorem) and that *S* entertains *p* (the antecedent of the right side of the theorem). We must now show that *S* possesses *F* (the consequent of the right side of the theorem). The two assumptions imply that *S* is capable of a thought involving *F*, which in turn implies (in accordance with the Speaks definition of concept possession) that *S* possesses *F*. Q.E.D.

¹⁹ This point is noted in Bermudez, section 3.

It was after he abandoned the principle I have named after him that Peacocke began defending the idea that experiences have nonconceptual content. This makes his use of the term ‘nonconceptual content’ misleading, since once you abandon the principle, you can believe that experience is nonconceptual in the state or possessional sense without believing that its *contents* are nonconceptual in any good sense at all.

being the case.²⁰ However, this suggestion makes it obscure how one Fregean proposition rather than another can be the content of the experience. An experience that indicates that p also indicates that q, where q is any proposition nomologically equivalent to p, even if q is not the same Fregean proposition as p and does not involve the same concepts as p. So the possibility of states that are possessionally nonconceptual but compositionally conceptual as Crowther understands the latter phrase—in terms of having a Fregean proposition as content—has not been fully made out.²¹

Let us turn now to the other mixed combination—being conceptual in the state sense, but nonconceptual in the content sense. To assume a case fitting this description as envisioned by Crowther, we must assume a subject S in a state M with a content p that is not a conceptual content—so whatever sort of thing p is, it is not composed of concepts—yet S must nonetheless possess certain concepts. But *which* concepts? We cannot say “the concepts in p,” because there are no concepts in p!

The problem that is now emerging can be set out as a dilemma concerning how we are to understand the definition of state conceptuality. The definition from Byrne I have been using runs thus: state M with content p is state conceptual iff it is not possible for someone to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p. The first horn of the dilemma threatens if we understand the definiens as implying that there are concepts in p, as though the definite description had been placed out front: the concepts

²⁰ I take this analysis of informational content from Dretske 1981. Crowther uses the phrase ‘informational content’ without committing himself to any particular analysis of it, but I doubt that he would object to Dretske’s.

²¹ A similar problem arises if perceptual contents are Stalnakerian or Russellian, since these, too, may differ even when they are nomologically equivalent.

in *p* are such that it is not possible for someone to be in *M* without possessing those concepts. In that case, the combination of content nonconceptuality with state conceptuality would be contradictory: there would and would not be concepts in *p*. The second horn threatens if we understand the definiens as *not* implying that there are concepts in *p*, as though it had been written as a universal generalization: whatever concepts are in *p* are such that it is not possible for someone to be in *M* without possessing those concepts. In that case, if there are no concepts in *p*, the definiens will be true vacuously—any subject of the state will need to have whatever concepts are in *p*, namely, none. If a state has *nonconceptual* content, it will therefore follow trivially that it is a *conceptual* state. This is an odd result and no doubt an unintended one.

To avoid this unintended result, Byrne redefines state nonconceptuality as follows:

State *M* with content *p* is state nonconceptual iff (i) either *p* contains concepts, but it is possible for someone to be in *M* without possessing those concepts, or (ii) *p* is a nonconceptual content (2005, 234).

Under this definition, a state with nonconceptual content no longer qualifies trivially as a conceptual state. Instead, it automatically counts as a *nonconceptual* state by virtue of the second disjunct in the definiens. The combination of content nonconceptuality with state conceptuality is excluded by definition.²²

Yet Crowther defends the possibility of precisely this combination (his P3).

Obviously, then, he must not be using Byrne's definition. Here again are his own definitions of the two notions that make up the P3 combination:

²² This is the same result as under the first horn above, though not reached from the same case assumption, as Byrne's revised definiens does not imply that there are concepts in *p*.

If S has experience e with content p, p is a (possessionally) conceptual content iff in order for S to be undergoing e, S must possess all the concepts that characterize p. (252)

p is a (compositionally) nonconceptual content iff it is not the case that p is composed exclusively of concepts.

The distinction mooted earlier between a content's being *composed* of concepts and its being *characterized* by concepts now becomes significant. Crowther never highlights this distinction, but if I am right, it is crucial for upholding the possibility of the P3 combination. If a content can be characterized by certain concepts without being composed of any concepts, there is room for a nonvacuous requirement that a subject having an experience e with content p must possess certain concepts—those that *characterize* p—even though p is not *composed* of any concepts at all. That would give us the P3 combination.

What is it for a concept to characterize a content? Crowther offers no definition, but he does give us an example:

The concepts that characterize the content of the belief that grass is green, for example, are the concept *grass* and the concept *green*. (251)

This is in line with the more general definition given by Byrne:

F characterizes p iff p = the proposition that ...F.... (233)²³

What would be an illustrative case of the P3 combination? Crowther says we would get this combination if a perceptual state had a Russellian proposition *a is F* as its content (a nonconceptual content by his Fregean lights) and if there were a requirement à la

²³ I am not sure that Byrne himself intends any distinction between composing and characterizing; he seems to use the phrases 'contains concepts' and 'is characterized by concepts' interchangeably.

Evans that you do not perceive p unless you possess the concepts that characterize p .²⁴

Voilà!—a state that is compositionally nonconceptual, but possessionally conceptual.

But which concepts characterize the Russellian proposition a is F ? Trouble arises here given the coarse-grained way in which Crowther takes Russellian propositions and their constituents to be individuated. He says the constituents of Russellian propositions are not Fregean senses, but “items at the level of reference” (253). Apparently, the Russellian proposition a is F is identical with the Russellian proposition b is G if ‘ a ’ is coextensive with ‘ b ’ and ‘ G ’ with ‘ F ’. By the Byrne criterion, a is F will therefore be characterized by G .²⁵ That makes for an awful lot of concepts the subject needs to possess!²⁶

Perhaps the perplexities I have raised about the P3 and P4 combinations can be resolved. However that may be, there is a further criticism that may be leveled against Crowther: his arguments cannot be used to establish the possibility of *both* mixed combinations, since one of them uses a premise that is the contradictory of a premise used in the other.

In his illustration of the P4 possibility (compositional conceptuality without possessional conceptuality), Crowther supposes that animals without concepts might have

²⁴ The Evans requirement stems from two other requirements: (i) that you do not perceive a content a is F carried by your visual system unless that content can serve as an input to your reasoning system, and (ii) that the content a is F cannot serve as such an input unless you have the concepts a and F .

²⁵ The Byrne definition of characterizing, though perhaps intended to be applied to non-Fregean propositions, does not in fact comport very well with them. Take, for example, the Stalnakerian proposition *all cats are cats*. This proposition is characterized by the concept *cat*. Moreover, it is identical with the proposition *all dogs are dogs*, since the cat proposition and the dog proposition are true in precisely the same worlds (namely, all of them). So the proposition *all dogs are dogs* is characterized by the concept *cat*.

²⁶ If you say, “Not at all, because F and G are the same concept,” you have gone from making possessing all the requisite concepts too difficult to making it too easy. Get hold of the concept *creature with a heart* and you will thereby get hold of the concept *creature with a kidney*.

a mode of access to conceptually composed facts that counts as perceiving them—they might undergo perceptual events with the content *a is F* as the result of capacities to respond differentially to *a* and *F*. To get this possibility, he must suppose that perception does *not* require the possession of any concepts.

In his illustration of the P3 possibility (possessional conceptuality without compositional conceptuality), Crowther supposes that a state with the content *a is F* does not count as a perceptual state unless the subject is able to have the thought that *a is F*. To get this possibility, he must suppose that perception *does* require the possession of concepts.

So we cannot, by Crowther's assumptions and examples, show that the two mixed combinations are *both* possible. We can show at best that one or the other of them is possible.

I am inclined to think myself that a state is nonconceptual in the possessional or state sense if and only if its content is nonconceptual in the compositional or content sense. So why did I urge in section I that the nonconceptuality of contents not be defined in terms appropriate to the nonconceptuality of states? The answer is that if there is an equivalence between the two notions, it ought to be established by argument rather than by definition.²⁷

²⁷ Here is an example illustrating the dialectical point I am trying to make. The positivists believed that there is no such thing as the synthetic a priori—that the notions of the synthetic and the empirical were necessarily coextensive. Believing this to be so, Ayer defined an analytic statement as one whose truth depends only on the meanings of its constituent symbols; he then proceeded to define a synthetic statement not simply as a nonanalytic one (which would have been the neutral definition), but as one whose truth can be ascertained only by experience (Ayer [1946] 1952, 78-79). That is an objectionable tactic. Even if the synthetic and the empirical are necessarily coextensive, one should not secure that result directly by definition; Ayer closed a question that should have been left open to further investigation.

III

In this section I present an argument I find convincing for the thesis that some perceptual states have nonconceptual content—the argument from perceptual experience as a source of concepts.²⁸

Not very long ago (in the writings of Sellars, for instance, who was continuing a tradition going back to Kant), the expressions ‘having conceptual content’ and ‘having propositional content’ were used more or less interchangeably.²⁹ This is not true today; there are many who affirm that perception has propositional content, but then go on to debate whether it has conceptual content. Being somewhat nonplussed by the notion of a propositional content that is not conceptual, I take the argument I present as an argument for the nonpropositionality of some perceptual states. But others may take it if they like merely as an argument for the nonconceptual character of some perceptual contents or of the states incorporating those contents.

My argument consists in setting forth an inconsistent tetrad of statements, one of which must of course be rejected, and then contending that the best strategy for avoiding the inconsistency lands us in a nonpropositional view of the contents of perception. Here is the tetrad:

- A. All experience, including perceptual experience, has propositional content; it is experience that p.
- B. No one can have any propositional attitude (or any other experiential relation) toward a propositional content who does not already grasp whatever concepts are involved in

²⁸ Versions of this argument are given by Heck (2000) and Roskies (2008) among others. In the scheme suggested in the appendix, its conclusion is minimal content nonconceptualism.

²⁹ “The only use the understanding can make of these concepts,” Kant says, “is to judge by means of them” ([1787] 1965, A68/B93). The content of a judgment is, of course, a proposition.

the articulation of that content. (You cannot entertain or be experientially related to the proposition that *a is F* unless you grasp the concept of an F thing.)

- C. As Locke taught, there are many concepts that are first acquired through perceptual experience; it is experience that makes it possible for you subsequently to entertain contents involving the concept.
- D. If concept F is acquired through experience E and E has propositional content, then F is a constituent of that content.

To see that these four statements are indeed inconsistent, assume (as C says we may) that concept F is acquired through experience E. According to A, E has a propositional content. According to D, F is a constituent of that content. According to B, no one can undergo E who does not already possess or grasp F. But that contradicts our initial assumption that F is first acquired through E.

There are four possible responses to the tetrad.

Reject A: This is what I recommend. There is such a thing as seeing an expanse of red or a shiny apple or a vista of the Grand Canyon without thereby being experientially related to any proposition. You may, of course, entertain or believe various propositions in response to your experience, but your experience is not constituted by relations to those propositions. In holding this view, I am rejecting not just content conceptualism, but the position nowadays often known as intentionalism (Byrne 2001.)

Reject B: This response would be available if the combination of state nonconceptuality with content conceptuality were possible. That, however, is one of the combinations I raised doubts about in section II.

Reject C: This is what Sellars (1963) and McDowell (1994) do; they reject empiricist-abstractivist theories of concept formation along with their rejection of the so-called

Myth of the Given. I think the Myth is no myth, but that is too large a matter to be argued here.³⁰

Reject D: This alternative may seem strange at first, but I shall mention two reasons that might be given for questioning D.

First, it might be suggested that a complex concept can be acquired from a sequence of experiences no one of which has that concept as a constituent, as when one constructs the concept Unicorn from the concepts Horse and Horn, each acquired separately from experience. That, of course, was explicitly allowed for in Hume's version of concept empiricism. However, this consideration only shows that it would be false to say that if concept F is acquired from experiences E_1 through E_n , then F is a constituent of one of E_1 - E_n . It does not show that D is false as stated. Moreover, we could avoid this objection altogether simply by stipulating in C that some *simple* concepts are acquired through experience, which is what concept empiricists typically assert.

Second, it might be suggested that besides having propositional content, an experience has a surrounding phenomenal halo or aura from which a concept could be abstracted even if the content did not contain that concept. However, it is clear that this suggestion runs contrary to the spirit of intentionalism and could hardly be used in defense of it. A properly formulated intentionalism goes beyond A to A': all perceptual experience has its phenomenal features *exhaustively determined* by its propositional content. Under this assumption, it is plausible that a phenomenal feature of an experience could permit the

³⁰ See Van Cleve 1985 for a limited defense of the Myth of the Given. See Roskies 2008 for an argument that those who deny that concepts are learned from experience must endorse either an implausible nativism about concepts or an implausible theory of concept acquisition through brute-causal processes occurring at some sub-personal level.

acquisition of concept F from the experience only if F were a constituent of the propositional content of that experience.³¹

Of course, if A is strengthened to A' in this way, the conclusion I obtain from my favored way of eliminating the inconsistency will have to be correspondingly weakened. The conclusion will now be that not all experience has a propositional content that determines its phenomenal character. The weaker conclusion is good enough for me, as perceptual contents would still have a nonconceptual aspect.

Going back to the original A-D tetrad, perhaps some will say that a better response than mine is to hold that some experiences have (i) propositional contents with no concepts as constituents or else (ii) contents composed of concepts, but such that the perceiver need not possess those concepts to take those propositions as contents. To go for (i) would be to embrace content nonconceptualism;³² to go for (ii) would be to embrace state nonconceptualism. Either way, we would arrive at some form of nonconceptualism about perceptual content.^{33 34}

³¹ In effect, I am suggesting that if the second challenge to D is taken seriously, one should rewrite D as D': If concept F is acquired through experience E and E has a propositional content that determines its phenomenal character, then F is a constituent of that content.

³² Here I am using Crowther's characterization of what it is for a content to be nonconceptual and embedding it in Byrne's form of definition for content nonconceptualism.

³³ The leading argument on the other side of the debate is the epistemic argument of McDowell and others, which may be formulated as follows: (1) experiences are capable of justifying beliefs; (2) experiences justify beliefs only if they transmit justification to the beliefs; (3) experiences are capable of transmitting justification to beliefs only if they have the same sort of content as beliefs, namely, conceptual content; therefore (4) experiences have conceptual content. In this formulation, I would deny premise (2). For a critique of the transmission model of justification, see Van Cleve 1985.

³⁴ I wish to thank Bryan Blackwell, Janet Levin, Michael Pace, and David Bennett for comments on earlier drafts.

APPENDIX: TERMINOLOGY AND TAXONOMY OF POSITIONS

Here are the terms employed by the authors I have discussed to express their respective distinctions:

	Notion that applies to contents themselves	Notion that applies to states of subjects or their relation to contents
Speaks	Absolutely nonconceptual content	Relatively nonconceptual content or conceptual content relative to subject A
Byrne	Nonconceptual content	Nonconceptual state
Crowther	Compositionally nonconceptual content	Possessionally nonconceptual content

With definitions in hand of what it is to have conceptual content or nonconceptual content, one may go on to distinguish a number of possible positions or “isms.” Here are some of the possible positions in regard to what Byrne calls conceptual or nonconceptual content, arranged here in a modified square of opposition:

Total content conceptualism: every perceptual state has conceptual content exclusively.	Total content nonconceptualism: every perceptual state is devoid of conceptual content; it has nonconceptual content exclusively.
Moderate content conceptualism: every perceptual state has some conceptual content.	Moderate content nonconceptualism: every perceptual state has some nonconceptual content.
Minimal content conceptualism: some perceptual states have some conceptual content.	Minimal content nonconceptualism: some perceptual states have some nonconceptual content.

The top two positions are contraries (assuming there are perceptual states). The bottom two positions are subcontraries (assuming there are perceptual states and that at least some of them have content). Each position entails all the positions below it (again

assuming there are perceptual states). Each position in a corner box is the contradictory of the position in the diagonally opposite corner box.

If we combine the left middle with the bottom right position, we get the view Byrne calls “partial content conceptualism.” If we combine right middle with bottom left, we get the view he calls “partial content nonconceptualism,”

The chart presupposes a notion that has not actually been defined: that of having *some* conceptual content. That notion sounds reasonable enough; after all, a soft drink can have some sugar content and some nonsugar content. It is strange, then, that many definitions on offer of ‘having conceptual content’ and ‘having nonconceptual content’ (including those discussed in this article) make those notions mutually exclusive. This is so even in cases in which the author employing the definition goes on to discuss the possibility of a state’s having some conceptual content and some nonconceptual content.³⁵ Here is a place where further refinement of notions is in order.

A chart for parallel positions regarding state conceptuality or nonconceptuality may also be drawn up. The chart below presupposes that there are perceptual states, that total content conceptualism is true, and that Crowther combinations of state nonconceptuality with content conceptuality are possible.

Total state conceptualism: every perceptual state is such that the subject must possess all the concepts involved in its content.	Total state nonconceptualism: every perceptual state is such that the subject need not possess <i>any</i> of the concepts involved in its content.
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³⁵ Typical in this regard is Nöe 2004. On p. 181, Nöe defines the notion of a content’s being conceptual in an all-or-nothing way. On p. 183, he discusses arguments for the view that perception is not “thoroughly conceptual.”

Moderate state conceptualism: every perceptual state is such that the subject must possess some of the concepts involved in its content.	Moderate state nonconceptualism: every perceptual state is such that the subject need not possess <i>all</i> of the concepts involved in its content.
Minimal state conceptualism: some perceptual states are such that the subject must possess some of the concepts involved in their contents.	Minimal state nonconceptualism: some perceptual states are such that the subject need not possess all of the concepts involved in their contents.

Of course, there are yet further positions in logical space if we consider intersections of positions regarding state conceptuality or nonconceptuality with moderate or minimal content conceptualism or (as countenanced by Crowther) total content nonconceptualism.

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