

Does Perceptual Content Have to Be Objective? A Defense of Nonconceptualism

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Abstract

I defend nonconceptualism against the argument from objectivity, which is put forth by McDowell (1994). It proceeds along the following lines:

(P1) Perceptual experience has genuine content.

(P2) If perceptual experience has genuine content, this content has to be objective.

(P3) If the content of perceptual experience is objective, it has to be conceptual.

(C) Therefore, the content of perceptual experience has to be conceptual.

P1 is accepted by both conceptualists and nonconceptualists.

P3 can be motivated by the idea that integration of a perceptual experience into the subject's overall system of beliefs and concepts is necessary for it to present her with an objective world. The subject believes that the world exists mind-independently, and her concepts are shaped by this presupposition. Only a perceptual experience whose content is constituted by this kind of concepts and that is rationally integrated with this kind of beliefs can present the world as objective to the subject. The described rational integration is possible only if the perceptual content itself is conceptually structured.

The initial plausibility of P2 can be seen if we clarify 'objective'. That the content of perceptual experience must be *objective* means that, (a) perceptual experience represents features of the mind-independent world, (b) that these features are presented *to the subject*, and (c) that they are presented to the subject *as objective*.

To defend nonconceptualism I distinguish four different readings of the claim that genuine perceptual content must be objective. I show that the argument does not go through on any of them.

The nonconceptualist should concede that genuine perceptual content must *represent* features of the objective world (*objectivity*₁) and that the world must strike the *subject*, at the individual level, in a certain way in perceptual experience (*objectivity*₂). Moreover, there is some reason to accept the further claim that the subject needs to have some cognitive capacities beyond perception, such as memory or the ability to construct cognitive maps (*objectivity*₃). (See Peacocke (2003) and Burge (2010).) But there is no reason to accept the strongest notion (*objectivity*₄), viz. that a subject must have a *conceptual understanding* of objectivity in order to have genuinely content-bearing perceptual experience. The other three notions already provide us with a rich understanding of 'objective'. Moreover, *objectivity*₄ (as well as the the conceptualist's motivation for P3 above) cannot account for the unchangeable objective import of the *solipsist's* perceptual experiences.

Note that the first three readings of 'objective' do not mention concepts at all. The nonconceptualist can accept that perceptual content must be objective in these senses (accept P2) and then deny that this means that it has to be conceptual (deny P3). She can legitimately reject the claim that genuine perceptual content must be *objective*₄ (deny P2) so that, even if *objective*₄ content is necessarily conceptual (accepting P3), the argument for conceptualism does not go through.

To conclude, that genuine perceptual content must be objective does not tell against nonconceptualism.

References

- Burge, T. (2010), *Origins of Objectivity*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- McDowell, J. (1994), *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Peacocke, C. (2003), Postscript: The Relations between Conceptual and Nonconceptual Content, in Y. Gunther, ed., *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, Bradford Books, Cambridge, MA, pp. 318-322.