

The Myth of the Given and the Grip of the Given

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Appearances could after all be so constituted that the understanding would not find them in accord with the conditions of its unity... Appearances would nonetheless offer objects to our intuition, for intuition by no means requires the functions of thinking.

--I. Kant (*CPR* A90/B123)¹

Perceptual knowledge involves sensibility: that is, a capacity for differential responsiveness to features of the environment, made possible by properly functioning sensory systems. But sensibility does not belong to reason. We share it with non-rational animals. According to Sellars's dictum, the rational faculty that distinguishes us from non-rational animals must also be operative in our being perceptually given things to know. This brings into view a way to fall into the Myth of the Given. Sellars's dictum implies that it is a form of the Myth to think sensibility by itself, without any involvement of capacities that belong to our rationality, can make things available for our cognition. That coincides with a basic doctrine of Kant.... The Myth, in the version I have introduced, is the idea that sensibility by itself could make things available for the sort of cognition that draws on the subject's rational powers.

--J. McDowell²

I. Introduction

The thesis of *Non-Conceptualism* about mental content says that not all mental contents in the intentional or representational acts or states of minded animals are strictly determined by their conceptual capacities, and that at least some mental contents are strictly determined by their non-conceptual capacities.³ Non-Conceptualism is sometimes, but not always, combined with the further thesis that non-conceptual capacities and contents can be shared by rational human minded animals, non-rational human minded animals (and in particular, infants), and non-human minded animals alike. But in any case, Non-Conceptualism is directly opposed to the thesis of *Conceptualism* about mental content, which says that all mental contents are strictly determined by minded animals' conceptual capacities.⁴ Conceptualism is also sometimes, but not

always, combined with the further thesis that the psychological acts or states of infants and non-human minded animals lack mental content.

Before going on, I should say precisely what I mean by the notions of “minded animal” and “strict determination.”

By the notion of a “minded animal,” I mean any living organism with inherent capacities for

(i) *consciousness*, i.e., a capacity for embodied subjective experience,

(ii) *intentionality*, i.e., a capacity for conscious mental representation and mental directedness to objects, events, processes, facts, acts, other minded animals, or the subject herself (so in general, a capacity for mental directedness to *intentional targets*),

and also for

(iii) *caring*, a capacity for conscious affect, desiring, and emotion, whether directed to objects, events, processes, facts, acts, other minded animals, or the subject herself.

Over and above consciousness, intentionality, and caring, in some minded animals, there is also a further inherent capacity for

(iv) *rationality*, i.e., a capacity for self-conscious thinking according to principles and with responsiveness to reasons, hence poised for justification, whether logical thinking (including inference and theory-construction) or practical thinking (including deliberation and decision-making).

And by the notion of “strict determination” I mean *strong supervenience*, characterized as follows:

X strictly determines *Y* if and only if the *Y*-facts strongly supervene on the *X*-facts.

In turn,

Y-facts strongly supervene on *X*-facts if and only if *X*-facts necessitate *Y*-facts and there cannot be a change in anything's *Y*-facts without a corresponding change in its *X*-facts.

In other words, both *the existence* of the *Y*-facts and also *the specific character* of the *Y*-facts are metaphysically controlled by the existence and specific character of the *X*-facts.

Now in a nutshell, Non-Conceptualism says that our cognitive access to the targets of our intentionality is neither always nor necessarily mediated by concepts, and furthermore that our cognitive access to the targets of our intentionality is sometimes wholly *unmediated* by concepts; and Conceptualism says that our cognitive access to the targets of our intentionality is always and necessarily mediated by concepts. Here, then, is the fundamental philosophical issue: Can we and do we sometimes cognitively encounter things directly and pre-discursively (Non-Conceptualism), or must we always cognitively encounter them only within the framework of discursive rationality (Conceptualism)?

Non-Conceptualism undeservedly suffers from bad press. This is because it is often confused with adherence to what Wilfrid Sellars aptly called “the Myth of the Given,” whereby (what is supposedly) non-conceptual content is just the unstructured causal-sensory “given” input to the cognitive faculties, passively waiting to be actively carved up by concepts, propositions, and theories in “the logical space of reasons”:

The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state, we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.⁵

John McDowell has also influentially asserted, most notably in *Mind and World*, but also repeatedly in his follow-up work, that Non-Conceptualism mistakenly buys into the Myth, by virtue of its commitment to “the idea that sensibility by itself could make things available for the sort of cognition that draws on the subject’s rational powers.”

Yet this “sensationalist” conception of non-conceptual content is not really a thesis about *representational* content at all, but rather only a generally discredited thesis about how *phenomenal* content relates to conceptual content. In turn, this generally discredited sensationalist or phenomenalist conception of non-conceptual content has a Strange History. It began in Hegel’s misinterpretation of Kant, when Hegel wrongly

claims that Kant is a subjective or phenomenal idealist.⁶ Then Hegel's misinterpretation was re-transmitted via late 19th century and early 20th century Oxford neo-Hegelians and neo-Kantians, together with C.I. Lewis at Harvard, who passed it on to Wilfrid Sellars, who studied Kant at both Oxford and at Harvard. C.I. Lewis's influence on Kant studies in particular was directly and widely felt in North America in the second half of the 20th century via the writings of Lewis White Beck and Sellars. Beck and Sellars were both Lewis's Ph.D. students at Harvard. On the other side of the Atlantic, in 1936, Lewis's *Mind and the World Order* was the first contemporary philosophical text ever to be taught at Oxford, in a seminar run by J.L. Austin and Isaiah Berlin. Not altogether coincidentally, the second chapter of *Mind and the World Order* is entitled "The Given." Sellars in fact attended this Oxford seminar, started a D.Phil. dissertation on Kant with T.D. Weldon the same year, and later transferred to Harvard. Then Hegel's misinterpretation of Kant was again re-transmitted at the University of Pittsburgh, where Sellars taught and was enormously influential.

At Pittsburgh, the plot thickens. Here we find McDowell, the former Oxford philosopher who had been significantly influenced by the work of Gareth Evans and by Oxford neo-Kantianism, including of course Peter Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense*, explicitly rejecting the sensationalist or phenomenalist notion of non-conceptual content in *Mind and World*, where he ties it directly to Evans's work on demonstrative perception and singular thought in *The Varieties of Reference*, which McDowell himself had edited. And then more recently, McDowell again rejects the sensationalist conception of non-conceptual content in *Having the World in View*, where he finds vestiges of it in Sellars's writings. But in point of fact, in my opinion, what is being rejected by McDowell under

the rubric of “non-conceptual content” is nothing more and nothing less than *Hegel’s misinterpretation of Kant’s philosophy of cognition*.

On the contrary, however, as I am understanding it, Non-Conceptualism is a thesis about *representational content*, and *not* about sensory or phenomenal content—even if Non-Conceptualism does indeed have some non-trivial implications for the nature of sensory or phenomenal content. So it is nothing but a philosophical illusion to think that the Myth of the Given actually applies to Non-Conceptualism. This illusion can therefore be aptly dubbed *the Myth of the Myth of the Given*, or “the Myth of the Myth” for short.

In order to go beyond the Myth of the Myth, in this paper I want to argue that Non-Conceptualism is in fact a thesis about *the foundations of rationality in minded animals*. Non-Conceptualism, as I will understand it, says that our pre-discursive and essentially embodied encounters with the world, insofar as they are directly referential, and insofar as they are guided and mediated by non-conceptual content, are inherently *proto-rational cognitive* and *practical* encounters, not *non-rational*, *non-cognitive* and *non-practical* encounters with it. More precisely, it is what I call “essentially non-conceptual content,” and essentially non-conceptual content alone, that makes epistemic rationality and practical rationality really possible from the bottom up. Essentially non-conceptual content in this sense expresses *the body’s own reasons*, or what in section III I will call *the Grip of the Given*, and not some factor that is somehow alien to or outside of the rationality of minded animals.

In *Rationality and Logic*, I argued that a broadly Kantian theory of the nature of logic provides inherent *top-down* constraints on a theory of rationality in minded animals,

including of course human rationality.⁷ Compatibly with and complementary to that account, here what I want to show is how a broadly Kantian strategy for demonstrating and explaining the existence, semantic structure, and psychological function of essentially non-conceptual content can also provide an intelligible and defensible *bottom-up* theory of the foundations of rationality in minded animals. Otherwise put, if I am correct, then essentially non-conceptual content constitutes the semantic and psychological *substructure*, or matrix, out of which the categorically normative a priori *superstructure* of epistemic rationality and practical rationality—Sellars’s “logical space of reasons”—grows.

II. The Varieties of Non-Conceptualism, and Kant

There are two importantly different kinds of Non-Conceptualism.⁸ What is nowadays called “state” Non-Conceptualism says that the representational content of a given mental state⁹ is non-conceptual if and only if the subject of that state does not possess concepts for the specification of that state. So state Non-Conceptualism is based on theories of conceptual possession-conditions. By contrast, “content” Non-Conceptualism says that the content of a given mental state is non-conceptual if and only if the content of that state is of a different *kind* from the conceptual content of any mental act or state.

There are, I think, at least two very important reasons for being a defender of *content* Non-Conceptualism.

First, if our original cognitive encounter with the world is independent of concepts, and if it is also based on a different kind of content from conceptual content, then on the face of it, the prospects for a very robust (and indeed, *disjunctivist*) version of

naïve or direct perceptual realism look quite good. This is because, in that case, our original encounter with the world is not mediated by concepts, and therefore that encounter cannot fail to be veridical due to any failures of conceptualization, belief, judgment, propositions, or theory, given the plausible assumption that belief, judgment, propositions, and theories always and necessarily involve concepts. Naïve or direct realism about perception, in general, says that rational and other minded animals stand in immediate or unmediated cognitive relations to external objects that are consciously and correctly perceived by them. Disjunctivism about perception, which is both an intensification and a specification of naïve or direct perceptual realism, posits a categorical and mutually exclusive difference between veridical perception on the one hand, and non-veridical conscious experiences (e.g., illusory, otherwise imaginary, or outright hallucinatory conscious acts or states) on the other hand. I believe that this dichotomy, in turn, can be both directly attributed to and adequately explained by the difference between essentially non-conceptual content and conceptual content, together with the perhaps surprising thesis that necessarily, veridical conscious experiences and non-veridical conscious experiences are always inherently *discriminable* from one another by suitably attentive conscious subjects under cognitively favorable conditions, although *not always actually discriminated* in context due to perfectly ordinary or perhaps pathological or otherwise unusual lapses in attentive self-awareness by those same human-all-too-human, fallible conscious subjects.¹⁰

Second, if content Non-Conceptualism is true, and if a disjunctivist direct perceptual realism based on content Non-Conceptualism is also true, then I think the prospects for a bottom-up theory of the foundations of human rationality look quite good

too. According to this bottom-up theory, our conceptual and other intellectual capacities, and the full range of types of mental content—including those specifically associated with sense perception, perceptual knowledge, perception-based intentional action, perceptual self-knowledge, the analytic-synthetic distinction, a priori truth and knowledge in logic, and a priori truth and knowledge in mathematics, and also those capacities and types of mental content specifically associated with practical agency, right action, and practical reasoning—are all able to be explained in terms of the more basic and more primitive essentially non-conceptual psychological capacities shared with infants and non-human animals, or what I will call collectively *the proto-rational capacities*. Furthermore, this bottom-up explanation entails no deflation, narrowing, or reduction whatsoever in the epistemic scope, modal character, or categorically normative force of human epistemic and practical rationality as classically conceived by, e.g., Kant.

In the recent and contemporary literature on mental content, one can identify at least seven different arguments for Non-Conceptualism:¹¹

(I) From phenomenological richness: Our normal human perceptual experience is so replete with phenomenal characters and qualities that we could not possibly possess a conceptual repertoire extensive enough to capture them. Therefore normal human perceptual experience is always to some extent non-conceptual and has non-conceptual content.

(II) From perceptual discrimination: It is possible for normal human cognizers to be capable of perceptual discriminations without also being capable of re-identifying the objects discriminated. But re-identification is a necessary condition of concept-possession. Therefore normal human cognizers are capable of non-conceptual cognitions with non-conceptual content.

(III) From infant and non-human animal cognition: Normal human infants and some non-human animals are capable of perceptual cognition, but lack possession of concepts. Therefore normal human infants and some non-humans are capable of non-conceptual cognition with non-conceptual content.

(IV) From the distinction between perception (or experience) and judgment (or thought): It is possible for normal human cognizers to perceive something without also making a judgment about it. But non-judgmental cognition is non-conceptual. Therefore normal human cognizers are capable of non-conceptual perceptions with non-conceptual content.

(V) From the knowing-how vs. knowing-that (or knowing-what) distinction: It is possible for normal human subjects to know *how* to do something without being able to know *that* one is doing it and also without knowing precisely *what* it is one is doing. But cognition which lacks knowing-that and knowing-what is non-conceptual. Therefore normal human subjects are capable of non-conceptual knowledge-how with non-conceptual content.

(VI) From the theory of concept-acquisition: The best overall theory of concept-acquisition includes the thesis that simple concepts are acquired by normal human cognizers on the basis of non-conceptual perceptions of the objects falling under these concepts. Therefore normal human cognizers are capable of non-conceptual perception with non-conceptual content.

(VII) From the theory of demonstratives: The best overall theory of the demonstratives ‘this’ and ‘that’ includes the thesis that demonstrative reference is fixed perceptually, essentially indexically, and therefore non-descriptively by normal human speakers.¹² But essentially indexical, non-descriptive perception is non-conceptual. Therefore normal human speakers are capable of non-conceptual perception with non-conceptual content.

But in his influential paper, “Is There a Problem about Nonconceptual Content?,” Jeff

Speaks argues that there is in fact *no* problem about non-conceptual content because

(i) non-conceptualists have not established that the arguments they offer for the existence of non-conceptual content cannot be accommodated by suitably refined versions of Conceptualism,

and

(ii) non-conceptualists have not established that perceptual acts or states have representational content whose semantic structure and psychological function are distinct from the semantic structure and psychological function of conceptual content.¹³

I both agree and disagree with Speaks’s challenging claims. On the one hand, and on the side of agreement with his claim (i), I would want to make two even stronger claims, to the effect that:

(i*) it cannot be established that the arguments for state Non-Conceptualism cannot be accommodated by suitably refined versions of Conceptualism,

and

(ii*) most current versions of content Non-Conceptualism also cannot establish that perceptual acts or states have mental or representational content whose structure and function are any more than just accidentally or contingently distinct from the structure and function of conceptual content.

But on the other hand, I disagree with Speaks that as a consequence there is no problem for conceptualists about non-conceptual content.

This is because I believe that there are in fact perceptual acts or states whose mental or representational contents cannot—even in principle—be conceptual, in the sense that those contents are strictly determined by our conceptual capacities. These are *essentially non-conceptual* contents. It is crucial to note that I am not denying that all essentially non-conceptual contents can *in some sense or another* be conceptually grasped or conceptually specified. After all, here I am now writing various things about essentially non-conceptual contents, while obviously *also* using concepts in order to do this. Instead I am denying only that it is our capacity for conceptual grasping or specification *alone* which strictly determines the semantic structure and psychological function of essentially non-conceptual contents. Or otherwise put, I am denying only that the *nature* of essentially non-conceptual mental contents is conceptual and also denying only that the existence and specific character of essentially non-conceptual contents are *strictly determined* by our conceptual capacities, not denying that essentially non-conceptual mental contents can be conceptualized in some *other* non-essential, non-strictly determining sense. If all this is correct, then at least some perceptual mental acts or states in minded animals have mental or representational contents whose semantic structure and psychological function are necessarily distinct from the structure and function of conceptual content, and are not strictly determined by the conceptual

capacities of those minded animals. This is what I call *essentialist content Non-Conceptualism*.

Furthermore, I also believe that the special semantic and psychological character of these essentially non-conceptual contentful perceptual acts or states entails that *all* mental acts or states in minded animals, including of course their perceptual acts or states, contain non-conceptual content in this essentially distinct sense—although, to be sure, the presence of this essentially non-conceptual content does not necessarily exhaust the total content of such acts or states. The thesis of the ubiquity of essentially non-conceptual content is consistent with the thesis that essentially non-conceptual content is *combinable* with conceptual content. Indeed, I believe that essentially non-conceptual content not only *can* be combined with conceptual content, but also *must* be so combined if perceptual judgments, perceptual knowledge and self-knowledge, analytic truths and synthetic truths of all kinds, and a priori knowledge in logic and mathematics in particular, and also logical and practical reasoning about the perceivable natural world more generally, are to be possible. This is the “proto-rationality” of essentially non-conceptual content. So if I am correct, then the essentially non-conceptual content of an act or state is underdetermined by (= is not strictly determined by) the conceptual content of that act or state (= the necessary distinctness of essentially non-conceptual content), and this modal fact about essentially non-conceptual content is perfectly consistent with the further modal fact that in the mental acts and states of rational minded animals, essentially non-conceptual content must be presupposed by conceptual content and also be complementary with conceptual content (= the proto-rationality of essentially non-conceptual content). But in any case the nature of the uncombined or combined

essentially non-conceptual content of these perceptual acts or states needs to be explained.

At this point, I will offer a very brief sketch of a Kantian non-conceptualist analysis of essentially non-conceptual content, and also an equally brief argument for the existence of essentially non-conceptual content. More fully-elaborated versions of the analysis (including an associated theory of *concepts*) and the existence-proof can be found elsewhere.¹⁴ According to my analysis, then, X is an essentially non-conceptual content of perception if and only if X is a mental content such that

- (i) X is *not* a conceptual content,
- (ii) X is included in a mental state or act that directly refers to some or another actual individual macroscopic material being B in the local or distal natural environment of the minded animal subject of X —and it is also really possible that the minded animal subject of $X = B$ —and thereby both uniquely (if not always perfectly accurately¹⁵) locates B in 3D Euclidean orientable space and also uniquely (if not always perfectly accurately) tracks B 's thermodynamically irreversible causal activities in time in order to guide the subject's conscious intentional desire-driven body movements for the purposes of cognitive and practical intentional agency,

and

- (iii) X is an inherently context-sensitive, egocentric, first-personal, spatiotemporally structured content that is not ineffable, but instead shareable or communicable only to the extent that another minded animal ego or first person is in a cognitive position to be actually directly perceptually confronted by the same actual individual macroscopic material being B in a spacetime possessing the same basic 3D Euclidean orientable and thermodynamically irreversible structure.

Against the backdrop of that analysis, here is a very brief argument for the existence of the essentially non-conceptual content that I call—pun fully intended—*The Handwaving*

Argument:

The Handwaving Argument

- (1) Suppose that I am standing right in front of you and saying “All bachelors are males, and all males are animals, so it is analytic that all bachelors are animals, right?” By hypothesis, you are concentrating on what I am saying, and clearly understand it.

- (2) Suppose also that as I am saying “All bachelors are males,” my arms are held out straight towards you and I am also moving my right hand, rotated at the wrist, in a clockwise circular motion seen clearly from your point of view, which is also a counterclockwise circular motion seen clearly from my point of view.
- (3) Suppose also that as I am saying, “...and all males are animals,” I begin moving my left hand, again rotated at the wrist, in a counterclockwise circular motion seen clearly from your point of view, which is also a clockwise circular motion seen clearly from my point of view.
- (4) Suppose also that as I am saying, “... so it is analytic that all bachelors are animals, right?” I am moving both hands simultaneously in front of you in the ways specified in (2) and (3).
- (5) Your conceptual capacities are being used by you to concentrate on what I am saying about bachelors, males, and animals, and to understand it clearly, which by hypothesis you do.
- (6) Insofar as you are using those conceptual capacities to concentrate on and to understand clearly what I am saying, you are *not* using your conceptual capacities to see clearly what I am doing with my hands.
- (7) Yet you *also* see clearly what I am doing with my hands. Your conscious attention is *divided* into linguistic understanding and lucid vision, but by hypothesis your conceptual capacities for linguistic understanding are not *distracted*.
- (8) Therefore you are using your *non*-conceptual capacities to see clearly what I am doing with my hands.
- (9) The kind of mental content that guides and mediates the use of non-conceptual capacities is *essentially* non-conceptual content.
- (10) Therefore essentially non-conceptual content exists.

The larger argument I am running in this paper also has another important element. The argument I just offered for the existence and specific character of essentially non-conceptual content also has a distinctively *Kantian* provenance, by virtue of its being directly inspired by Kant’s famous (or notorious) “argument from incongruent counterparts” for the truth of the thesis of the *transcendental ideality of space and time*. I have explicitly worked out this Kantian connection in another paper, along with a more carefully-formulated and -defended version of the argument for the existence of essentially non-conceptual content.¹⁶

For this reason, a direct implication of my larger argument is that contemporary defenders of content Non-Conceptualism must in effect go “back to Kant” if they are to respond adequately to Speaks’s important challenge, by adopting a Kantian version of essentialist content Non-Conceptualism. Defenders of state Non-Conceptualism, in turn, must either just concede defeat to Conceptualism, or else become defenders of Kantian essentialist content Non-Conceptualism—which will call henceforth, for terminological convenience, *Kantian Non-Conceptualism*. In other words, I am saying that all rationally acceptable roads within Non-Conceptualism lead ultimately to Kantian Non-Conceptualism.

If I am correct about this deep historico-philosophical connection between essentialist Non-Conceptualism and Kant’s theory of cognition, then it is also a deliciously historically ironic fact, because Kant is almost universally regarded as the founding father of Conceptualism and the nemesis of Non-Conceptualism. York Gunther articulates this view perfectly:

In his slogan, “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind,” Kant sums up the doctrine of conceptualism.¹⁷

Nevertheless, I think that Kant is most accurately regarded as *not only* the founder of Conceptualism but also, and perhaps *even more importantly*, as the founder of Non-Conceptualism, and indeed, as the founder of content Non-Conceptualism and indeed also *essentialist* content Non-Conceptualism alike.¹⁸

In addition to the first epigraph of this paper, here are four Kant-texts that all more or less strongly confirm these claims:

Objects can indeed appear to us without necessarily having to be related to the functions of the understanding. (CPR A89/B122, underlining added)

That representation which can be given prior to all thinking is called **intuition**. (CPR B132, underlining added)

The manifold for intuition must already be given prior to the synthesis of the understanding and independently from it. (*CPR* B145, underlining added)

Concept differs from intuition by virtue of the fact that all intuition is singular. He who sees his first tree does not know what it is that he sees. (*VL Ak* 24: 905, underlining added)

In my opinion, what Kant's famous slogan about blind intuitions and empty thoughts actually means is that intuitions and concepts must always be combined together *for the special purpose of making objectively valid judgments*. But *outside* that context it is also perfectly possible for there to be directly referential intuitions without concepts ("blind intuitions," e.g., someone's first cognitive encounter with a tree), and also to have thinkable concepts without intuitions ("empty concepts," e.g., concepts of things-in-themselves). Indeed, it is precisely the fact of blind intuitions, whose semantic structure and psychological function are necessarily distinct from the semantic structure and psychological function of concepts, that drives Kant's need to argue in the first *Critique's* B edition Transcendental Deduction that all and only the objects of actual or possible human experience are necessarily conceptualized or conceptualizable under the pure concepts of the understanding or categories, and necessarily constrained by the transcendental laws of a pure science of nature. Otherwise blind intuitions might pick out *rogue objects* of human experience that are contingently or necessarily unconceptualizable, and nomologically intractable—causal deviants, and rude violaters of the general causal laws of nature.¹⁹ In this way, Kant's theory of concepts and judgment in the Transcendental Analytic provides foundations for Conceptualism. But equally and oppositely, Kant's theory of intuition in the Transcendental Aesthetic also provides foundations for Kantian Non-Conceptualism.

III. The Grip of the Given

Even Jeff Speaks, who of course is skeptical about the defensibility of content Non-Conceptualism, thinks that progress on the question of the relations between thought and perception cannot be made until we work out a theory of “the involvement of a faculty of spontaneity in perception,” that is, a theory which tells us precisely “how far one’s conceptual capacities—one’s abilities to have thoughts involving certain kinds of concepts—go toward shaping the contents of one’s experience”:

I do think that there is a natural understanding of the questions about nonconceptual content which I have not discussed, but which seems to be in the background of McDowell’s discussions of the issue. I have in mind his many discussions of the involvement of a faculty of spontaneity in perception. This is the Kantian question of how far one’s conceptual capacities—one’s abilities to have thoughts involving certain kinds of concepts—go toward shaping the contents of one’s experience. But is this a matter of the new concepts entering into the content of one’s perceptions, or of one simply being able to infer more sophisticated beliefs from a more or less stable perceptual content? This does strike me as an interesting and fundamental question with broad consequences for our understanding of the nature of intentionality.²⁰

Otherwise put, what Speaks is saying is that we need to have a theory which tells us precisely how our conceptual capacities encounter the externally-given world through sense perception, survive that encounter in such a way that our rationality remains fully intact (in the sense it does not collapse into a mere bundle of contingently associative cognitive powers, as in classical Empiricism), and at the same time, along with our capacity for sense perception, jointly produce the normative fact of experiential content.

Here is a working sketch of how Kantian Non-Conceptualism can provide a theory that will answer this “interesting and fundamental question with broad consequences for our understanding of the nature of intentionality.” The Kantian non-conceptualist theory will hold that essentially non-conceptual content has its *own* “lower-level spontaneity” (what Kant calls the spontaneity of the *synthesis speciosa* or “figurative synthesis” of the imagination at *CPR* B151) and hence its own lower-level

normativity, that is based on intrinsically spatiotemporally-structured and egocentrically-oriented instrumental—or hypothetically practical—rules for the skillful manipulation of tools and of the proximal or distal environment, and for the skillful finegrained or hyper-finegrained sensorimotor control of one’s own body in basic intentional actions. This theory will also hold that the lower-level spontaneity of our non-conceptual cognitive capacities is irreducible to the “higher-level spontaneity” (what Kant calls the spontaneity of the *synthesis intellectualis* or “intellectual synthesis” of the understanding and reason at *CPR* B151-152) of our conceptual capacities and our self-consciousness, and thus that its lower-level normativity is irreducible to the higher-level normativity of our conceptually-funded rationality, which is based on non-instrumental—or categorically practical—rules of logic and morality. And finally this theory will also hold that the lower-level spontaneity and lower-level normativity of essentially non-conceptual content, as situated content, is the necessary, presupposed ground of the higher-level rational spontaneity and normativity of conceptual content, and that both kinds of content are *complementary* to one another in the constitution of atomic or basic perceptual judgments, or what Kant calls “judgments of experience,”²¹ as well as a posteriori hypothetical/instrumental-practical judgments, a posteriori non-instrumental practical judgments, and also a priori judgments in mathematics, logic, and categorical/non-instrumental morality.

There is an extremely important question, raised by McDowell in *Mind and World*, of how non-conceptual content can ever really and truly *justify*, and not just “exculpate”—i.e., merely cause, occasion, or trigger—any of our rational human beliefs,

choices, and actions. Following out McDowell's thought, one might argue, e.g., in the following way:

- (1) All justification involves reasons.
- (2) All reasons stand in inferential relations to beliefs, choices, or actions.
- (3) Non-conceptual content on its own can never stand in inferential relations to beliefs, choices, or actions.
- (4) So non-conceptual content on its own can never supply justification for beliefs, choices, or actions.
- (5) Representational content is genuine only if it can supply justification for beliefs, choices, or actions.
- (6) So non-conceptual content is not genuine representational content.²²

I will call this *The Inferentialist Argument* against non-conceptual content. The Kantian Non-Conceptualist answer I want to give to McDowell's important question, and correspondingly the Kantian Non-Conceptualist response I am giving to the Inferentialist Argument, has three parts.

First, it is true that non-conceptual content certainly cannot ever justify beliefs, choices, or actions *if* one adopts the false "sensationalist" or phenomenalist conception of non-conceptual content that accepts the Myth of the Given, whereby non-conceptual content is nothing but the unstructured causal-sensory "given" input to the cognitive faculties, passively waiting to be carved up by concepts and propositions. To hold that non-conceptual content, so construed, could ever justify, would be mistakenly to accept the Myth of the Given. But to believe that the "sensationalist" conception is the only theory of how non-conceptual content could ever justify, is equally mistakenly to accept the Myth of the Myth.

Second, and again, it is true that non-conceptual content certainly cannot ever justify beliefs, choices, or actions *if* one adopts state Non-Conceptualism, which provides

no well-grounded principles or reasons for cognizing or acting, and instead only asserts the subject's non-possession of concepts. This is clearly shown by McDowell's most recent paper on the Conceptualism vs. Non-Conceptualism debate, "Avoiding the Myth of the Given," which demonstrates that failures of concept-possession are systematically consistent with the thesis that the content of perception is still thoroughly conceptual, although in an implicit or rationally undeveloped format.

But **third**, according to Kantian Non-Conceptualism, steps (2), (4), and (6) in the Inferentialist Argument are all false. Not all reasons stand in inferential relations to beliefs, choices, or actions. Some reasons are *the body's own reasons*. More precisely, essentially non-conceptual content is presupposed by all rational conceptual/propositional content whatsoever, and thus it is inherently *proto-rational*, and, in rational human minded animals, it is also self-reflectively constrained by categorically normative moral principles, and therefore can and does sometimes sufficiently justify perceptual beliefs and basic intentional actions, and thereby provide reasons for them, even without standing in inferential relations to them. There is therefore at least one *other* kind of normative, justifying relation to beliefs, choices, and actions, and essentially non-conceptual content can stand in *that* kind of relation to them. Hence essentially non-conceptual content is genuine, normatively-loaded representational content, although obviously of a categorically different kind from conceptual content.

Here is the explicit rationale for those claims. Essentially non-conceptual content can provide rational human minded animals with an inherently spatiotemporally situated, egocentrically-centered, biologically/neurobiologically embodied, pre-reflectively conscious, skillful perceptual and practical grip on things in our world. Call this

fundamental normative fact *the Grip of the Given*, with due regard to the two-part thought that *to stand within* the Grip of the Given is also thereby to *have* a grip on things in our world. More precisely: To stand within the Grip of the Given is to be so related to things and other minded animals in our world, and thereby to have a grip on the positions and dispositions of things and other minded animals in our world, via essentially non-conceptual content, that we are poised for achieving accurate reference, true statements, knowledge, consistency in logical reasoning, effectiveness in intentional performance, goodness of means or ends, rightness in choice or conduct, and consistency in practical reasoning—in short, we are poised for achieving any or all of the highest values of our cognitive and practical lives.

This conception of the Grip of the Given fully includes the familiar notion of responsiveness-to-reasons, but also extends well beyond it. Whenever perceivers like us stand within the Grip of the Given, then all of these achievements actually lie within the scope of our cognitive and practical powers. As cognizers and practical agents we are then *enabled* and *primed* for cognition and intentional action, and the fact that *we ought to X* necessitates the fact that *we really can X*.

To be sure, being in the Grip of the Given is not an absolute or even money-back guarantee. It does not itself *ensure* or *secure* any of these cognitive or practical achievements. In the event and in the actual thick of things, Stuff Can Happen, and things can go trivially or colossally wrong—FUBAR. For example, the perceiver might unknowingly be looking into an *Ames room*, which is a trapezoidally-shaped room that is specially designed to create the appearance of a rectangular room and create illusions of depth, when viewed from one particular standpoint.²³ It is therefore possible to stand in

veridical cognitive relations to inherently deceptive world-situations, and then the unlucky cognizer and practical agent just has to make-do as best she can in those situations. Such phenomena are usefully labelled *veridical illusions*.²⁴ The possibility of veridical illusions, in turn, raises a significant worry to the effect that the Grip of the Given cannot ever sufficiently justify cognition or intentional action.

What I want to say in reply to the worry about veridical illusions is this. The Grip of the Given endows and underwrites all actual cognitive and practical achievements, and all cognitive and practical success. It makes cognitive and practical success really possible for all rational minded animals or real persons, including of course human ones. It enables and primes all our cognitive and practical success. The Grip of the Given does not, however, *buy us* cognitive or practical success. Nothing can. Indeed, it would be a serious Cartesian fallacy about the rational animal mind to think that anything ever *could*. There is still the rational minded animal's own free contribution to cognition and intentional action, and the world's brute factual contribution. An ineluctable element of *contingency* and *luck* is always involved. Sufficient justification according to the Grip of the Given is therefore not a *success mechanism*. On the contrary, sufficient justification according to the Grip of the Given is nothing more and nothing less than an adequate ground of epistemic and practical *confidence*—it is just an *adequate facilitator*, not a success mechanism.

In short then, in addition to inferential relations to beliefs, choices, and actions, there is also the normative, sufficiently justifying non-inferential *grip* relation to beliefs, choices, and actions, and essentially non-conceptual content can stand in *that* kind of relation to them. Therefore it is precisely the Grip of the Given, via essentially non-

conceptual content, that is our non-inferential sufficiently justifying reason for basic perceptual belief or basic intentional action, or at least this grip is the primitive fact that provides non-inferential sufficiently justifying reasons for us to hold basic perceptual beliefs or perform basic intentional actions. No rational human minded animal cognitive or practical activity could ever be actually accurate, true, sufficiently justified, logically consistent, effective, good, right, or practically consistent without essentially non-conceptual content. And correspondingly no rational human minded animal could ever freely and successfully navigate her way through the world and perform basic intentional acts according to principles without it. So that is why essentially non-conceptual content really and truly sufficiently justifies, when it is combined with the other cognitive and practical capacities that are jointly essential to human rationality and free agency.

Otherwise put, and now generalizing to contemporary epistemology, the theory of basic perceptual knowledge that I am proposing is an “internalistic Externalism.” Classical *Internalism* in the theory of knowledge says that knowledge is sufficiently justified true belief by virtue of a higher-order act or state of knowing-that-I-know, which yields indubitability. Classical *Externalism* in the theory of knowledge, by contrast, says that knowledge is true belief plus justification by a reliable “sub-personal” causal mechanism of belief-formation, hence without any higher-order act or state of knowing-that-I-know. Classical Internalism makes no appeal to inherently mechanical worldly factors and instead appeals to airtight inferential reasons for the justification of belief, usually in the guise of inherently mentalistic evidence. Contrariwise, classical Externalism makes no appeal to inherently inferential factors and instead appeals to inherently mechanical worldly factors—natural mechanisms and sub-personal belief-

causing processes—for the justification of belief.²⁵ What is right about classical Internalism is its appeal to *mentalistic* evidence for the justification of belief, and what is right about classical Externalism is its appeal to *worldly* factors together with its insight that knowledge is possible at the first-order level without any appeal to inferential relations or higher-order validation. What is wrong about *both* classical approaches is the false shared assumption that justificatory appeals to mentalistic evidence and to worldly factors are somehow fundamentally at odds with one another, precisely because they think of the mentalistic evidence as *inherently mental and fundamentally non-physical* and also of the worldly evidence as *inherently mechanical and fundamentally non-mental*.

By sharp contrast to both classical Internalism and classical Externalism, then, according to my view basic perceptual knowledge is sufficiently justified true belief by virtue of the Grip of the Given. The Grip of the Given, via essentially non-conceptual content, provides a genuinely worldly factor which is nevertheless neither inherently mechanical nor sub-personal, precisely because it inherently includes my pre-reflectively conscious causally efficacious grip on the world in the very same relation which constitutes the world's causally efficacious grip on me. As a direct consequence, the Grip of the Given is a genuinely worldly but also genuinely non-inferential, pre-reflectively conscious, and practical two-way primitive relation that fully enables, endows, primes, and underwrites basic perceptual beliefs and basic intentional actions in a first-order way, hence without any higher-order act or state of knowing-that-I-know. My “internalistic Externalism” about basic perceptual knowledge is therefore not only distinct from

classical Internalism and classical Externalism alike, but also designed to cohere seamlessly with Kantian Non-Conceptualism.

IV. Conclusion

If what I have argued in this essay is correct, then it follows that essentially non-conceptual content, unified by the Kantian necessary a priori subjective forms of sensibility, not only exists, but also is the original and necessary two-way continuous thread-of-life by which the world is sensorimotor-subjectively or pre-reflectively consciously delivered up from human minded animal experience to our self-conscious or self-reflective thought and action-oriented deliberation, and then is downwardly transformed by our thinking and deliberative action under universal a priori categorically normative principles. So when we go beyond the Myth of the Myth, what we find is just *ourselves as rational human minded animals*, fully embedded in the dynamic natural world, living purposefully and purposively within the unshakeable Grip of the Given.²⁶

NOTES

¹ For convenience I refer to Kant's works infratextually in parentheses. The citations include both an abbreviation of the English title and the corresponding volume and page numbers in the standard "Akademie" edition of Kant's works: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Königlich Preussischen (now Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: G. Reimer [now de Gruyter], 1902-). For references to the first *Critique*, I follow the common practice of giving page numbers from the A (1781) and B (1787) German editions only. I generally follow the standard English translations from the German texts, but have occasionally modified them where appropriate. Here is a list of the abbreviations and English translations of the works cited:

CPR *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997.

VL "The Vienna Logic," In *Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Logic*. Trans. J.M. Young. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992. Pp. 251-377.

² J. McDowell, "Avoiding the Myth of the Given," in J. McDowell, *Having the World in View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 256-272, at p. 257.

³ See, e.g., J. Bermúdez, "Nonconceptual Mental Content," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2003 Edition), E. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2003/entries/content-nonconceptual/>; G. Evans, *Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), esp. chs. 4-6; and Y. Gunther (ed.), *Essays on Nonconceptual Content* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

⁴ See, e.g., J. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994); McDowell, *Having the World in View*; S. Sedivy, "Must Conceptually Informed Perceptual Experience Involve Non-conceptual Content?," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996): 413-431; and B. Brewer, *Perception and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).

⁵ W. Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in W. Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), pp. 127-196, at p. 169.

⁶ See, e.g., P. Guyer, "Thought and Being: Hegel's Critique of Kant's Theoretical Philosophy," in F. Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 171-210.

⁷ See R. Hanna, *Rationality and Logic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁸ See, e.g., R. Heck, "Nonconceptual Content and the 'Space of Reasons'," *Philosophical Review* 109 (2000): 483-523; R. Heck, "Are There Different Kinds of Content?," in J. Cohen and B. McLaughlin (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 117-138; T. Crowther, "Two Conceptions of Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism," *Erkenntnis* 65 (2006): 245-276; D. Laurier, "Nonconceptual Contents vs. Nonconceptual States," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 68 (2004): 23-43; and J. Speaks, "Is There a Problem about Nonconceptual Content?," *Philosophical Review* 114 (2005): 359-398.

⁹ I see no reason to think that content-bearing mental episodes or events must be mental *states* exclusively and cannot also be mental *acts*. Indeed, given my emphasis on cognitive and practical intentional agency, it seems to me that the primary bearers of content are intentional acts, and that intentional states derive their contents from act-contents. To keep things relatively simple however, I won't argue for that thesis here, or tinker with standard formulations in the secondary literature; but it remains true, that every occurrence of 'states' should really be understood to mean the same as 'acts or states'.

¹⁰ I argue this explicitly and in detail in *The Rational Human Condition* (Unpublished MS, 2010 version), ch. 2.3.

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- ¹¹ All of these arguments are covered in Gunther (ed.), *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*.
- ¹² See also R. Hanna, "Direct Reference, Direct Perception, and the Cognitive Theory of Demonstratives," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (1993): 96-117.
- ¹³ Speaks, "Is There a Problem about Nonconceptual Content?"
- ¹⁴ See R. Hanna, "Kantian Non-Conceptualism," *Philosophical Studies* 137 (2008): 41-64; R. Hanna and M. Chadha, "Non-Conceptualism and the Problem of Perceptual Self-Knowledge," *European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2010); and R. Hanna, "Beyond the Myth of the Myth: A Kantian Theory of Non-Conceptual Content," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming.
- ¹⁵ In other words, essentially non-conceptual content is normatively governed by an ideal standard of accurate direct reference, and can still be directly referential when it is more or less inaccurate.
- ¹⁶ See Hanna, "Kantian Non-Conceptualism."
- ¹⁷ Y. Gunther, "Introduction," in Gunther (ed.), *Essays on Nonconceptual*, pp. 1-19, at p. 1.
- ¹⁸ R. Hanna, "Kant and Nonconceptual Content," *European Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 247-290.
- ¹⁹ See R. Hanna, "Kant's Non-Conceptualism, Rogue Objects, and the Gap in the B Deduction," forthcoming in R. Ramos dos Reis and A. Faggion (eds.), *Um Filósofo e a Multiplicidade de Dizeres* (Coleção, Brazil: CLE, 2010).
- ²⁰ Speaks, "Is There a Problem about Nonconceptual Content?," pp. 389-390.
- ²¹ See Hanna, *Kant, Science, and Human Nature*, chs. 1-2.
- ²² Many thanks to Dan Korman for helping me formulate this anti-non-conceptualist line of argument more clearly.
- ²³ See, e.g., URL = <http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.illusionism.org/media/ames-room.png&imgrefurl=http://www.illusionism.org/depth-perception/ames%2Broom/&usq=__x2C7ctXzMPY5SeZhFvZuNDq1BY8=&h=347&w=350&sz=19&hl=en&start=1&um=1&itbs=1&tbnid=O4VDayM6IZR7QM:&tbnh=119&tbnw=120&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dthe%2BAmes%2Broom%26hl%3Den%26client%3Dfirefox-a%26channel%3Ds%26rls%3Dorg.mozilla:en-US:official%26sa%3DX%26um%3D1>.
- ²⁴ See, e.g., R. Hanna, "Direct Reference, Direct Perception, and the Cognitive Semantics of Demonstratives," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (1993): 96-117.
- ²⁵ See, e.g., M. Steup, "Epistemology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2008 Edition)*, E. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/epistemology/>>.
- ²⁶ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the "Engaging McDowell" conference in Sydney Australia in July 2010, co-sponsored by the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales. I am very grateful to Huw Price and Melissa Merritt for organizing the conference, and also to John McDowell for his comments on the paper.