

CONCEPT AND HUMAN COGNITION: A CASE FOR NON-CONCEPTUALISM

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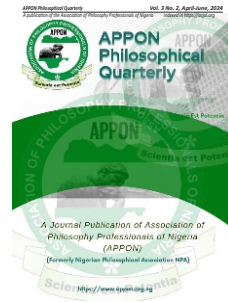
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ABSTRACT

The meaning of *concept*, particularly its place in the cognitive process of perception, is one of the long-standing controversies in contemporary epistemology. Scholars of the conceptualist persuasion, such as John McDowell, D. W. Hamlyn, Bill Brewer and Sonia Sedivy, claim that the content of perceptual experience is always in a kind of relation with propositional attitude. In propositional attitude beliefs, judgments, hopes and aspirations are instantaneously captured in perception. If this is granted, then, it becomes difficult to account for the phenomenon of non-conceptuality in perception. However, a critical look at the conceptualists' arguments quickly reveals the conflation of sensation and perception in the process of concept formation. In view of this, this paper critically examines and analyses the notion of concept and argues that if the role of concept in the cognitive process of perception is determined, the long-standing problem about the nature and characterization of the content of human perceptual experience will naturally dissolve. Whilst distinguishing and separating sensation from perception, the paper establishes that concept-formation is not generic to perception and that there is a place for non-conceptuality in perception. This paper employs conceptual analytical tools to distinguish the place of concept, sensation and perceptual experience from the cognitive status of perception, and makes a case for the phenomenon of non-conceptuality in perception. The paper is a critical analysis of the word, "concept" both from the traditional and contemporary perspectives. It aims to determine the place of concept in perception and how it relates to sensation. Some conceptualists' arguments on the nature and characterization of the content of perceptual experience are also examined. The paper concludes that perceptual cognition is a process, and concept and concept-formation is the end product of perception. To this end, the possibility of non-conceptual content in perception as derivable in sensation is no longer a problem.

Keywords: Cognition and Knowledge, Concept, Language, Perceptual Experience, Sensation.

Introduction

John McDowell, D. W. Hamlyn, Bill Brewer and Sonia Sedivy are among the advocates of conceptualism. They claim that concept is spontaneously formed and structured on

perceiving the world. For them, the content of perceptual experience is always in a kind of relation with propositional attitudes in such a way that beliefs and judgments are implicitly embedded. They contend that concepts are instantaneously derived when

perceiving the world, and that perception is dependent on experience; hence, perceptual experience is concept-bound.¹

If having concepts means a totally cognized experience, then, what would the place of sensation be? Perception is a process from sensation to cognition, while conceptualization would mean a completed process of perception. The conceptualists argue that unless one is able to form a concept about one's experience, one cannot be said to have truly experienced the world.² By epistemological deduction, they claim that experience is strictly tied to concept and any experience devoid of concept is not genuine. A critical look at this argument may force one into making distinctions among perception, sensation and experience. This raises the question, is experience the same thing as perception? Answering this question requires some conceptual clarifications. To 'sense' the world is merely to experience it, while to perceive it would translate to conceptualizing it. To make this distinction clearer, some scholars had employed "concept" in such a way that warrants making a distinction between sensation and perception. The two, they claim, are not the same and as such, should not be conflated. Thomas Reid, for instance, noted that "sensation has no object other than itself, while perception has physical things as its object and also involves concept and beliefs about them."³ Going by this, it means that sensation produces no concept at all, while perception necessarily does. If this is granted, then it would make the possibility of non-conceptuality something derivable from sensation, at least, in the cognitive process of perception. However, the conceptualists were fixated on the fact that perception must be related to the external world in some ways and, hence, must be conceptual. They insist that since the perceiver must have some kind of belief

about their experience no matter what, their experience cannot but be conceptual.

Traditional Perspective of Concept

Philosophers have divergent views on what 'concept' is and its place in perception. The notion, "concept", and its meaning have been loosely employed in epistemology until the Modern period when it was explained in relation to perception. The controversies surrounding its meaning explain, in part, the rivalry in epistemology between the rationalists and the empiricists. Concept-rationalists hold that 'concepts' are innate, while 'concept-empiricists' argue that 'concepts' are derived from experience. Going by the former, 'concepts' are independent of, and are derived *prior* to experience. Plato claims that there are certain things, such as honour, similarity, goodness, badness and so on, that can be known without necessarily being perceived with the senses. He argues that "Forms or Ideas" are known through dialectical reasoning and not by sense-perception because they are derived *prior* to experience. For him, the soul was formerly acquainted with ideas/forms of things before becoming imprisoned in the body: the soul already possessed the knowledge of concepts of things before its encounter with the phenomena world. It means, therefore, that concepts are innate. This conclusion, however, raises some epistemological questions that needed serious attention.

If 'concepts' are inborn, it would imply, for instance, that a man born blind would have concepts as much as a non-blind man. But can a man born blind possess the concept of *redness* if he had not initially experienced it? Concept-rationalists claim that some 'concepts', such as *cause* and *effect* and the idea of God are conceivable outside experience.⁴ Even though this argument seems naive in the Modern period, our

¹ Hilary Putnam, "Sensation and Apperception," in S. Miguens and G. Preyer (eds.), *Consciousness and Subjectivity: Philosophical Analysis*, 47, (2012), 39-50; Roberta Locatelli and Keith A. Wilson, "Introduction: Perception without Representation," *Topoi*, 36, (2017), 197-212. DOI 10.1007/s11245-017-9460-1.

² Robert H. Sharf, "Knowing Blue: Early Buddhist Accounts of Non-Conceptual Sense Perception," *Philosophy East & West*, 68 no.3, (2018), 826-870.

³ Cited in David W. Hamlyn, "Perception, Sensation and Non-Conceptual Content," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 44, (1994), 147.

⁴ John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, (London: Routledge and Kegan

concern is to show that concepts and concept-formation are separable from experience and independent of it so that the notion of non-conceptual content in the cognitive process of perception is established.

Locke distinguishes between simple and complex ideas. For him, simple idea is the simplest unanalyzable fraction of perception such as red, sweet, and pain; while formulating the idea of a “golden mountain and black roses” belongs to the category of a complex idea. He claims that the human mind possesses the ability to put together, through the faculty of imagination, the combination of simple ideas that have already been acquired through particular experiences to form new but complex ideas. Therefore, no human mind can create simple ideas without having a particular experience. It therefore means that anyone who has never seen the colour red or felt pain before can never have the concept. He asserts:

Nothing... seems more abounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monster, and join incongruous shapes and appearances, costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects.⁵

The creative power of the human mind is no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing the materials furnished by the senses and experience. So, when we imagine “a golden mountain”, all that we have done is merely to join two consistent ideas, “gold” and “mountain”, with which we were formerly acquainted.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the words “idea” and “concept” were used interchangeably, until “idea” was expanded in the twentieth century to include feelings and imaginations. For example, the expression, “I have the idea that someone is watching me” simply translates to mean “I have the impression that someone is watching me”. David Hume (1711-1776) was the first to make a clear distinction between “impression” and “idea”. He explains idea as “a weak copy or a shadow of an impression.”⁶ By this, he means that impression is what we actually perceive and not ideas. He explains it as follows: “If I have a look at a green tree, what I have is a sense-impression of green but when I close my eyes to imagine something green, all I have is the idea of green.”⁷

Hume relates impression to perception and ideas to imagination. He defines 'concepts' in terms of image formation in the mind, and since no image can be formed in the mind without perceiving, he concludes that one must first have an impression (sensation) before having the idea ('concept'). So, for Hume, impressions precede ideas, hence, sensation comes before 'concepts' and is separable from it. Therefore, in perception, what we first experience is impressions and not ideas. And without impression it means that the process of thought cannot take place because what we see is what we conceptualize. From this line of argument, it is evident that Hume indeed conflates impression and experience with sensation.

Hume's argument is also in consonance with Immanuel Kant's popular dictum: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without 'concepts' are blind.”⁸ Perhaps, the idea that “impression precedes idea” informs Hume's popular thesis, “No impression, no idea.”⁹ He asserts: “If anyone claims that he has some ideas, we only need to ask him, from what impression is that

Paul, 1956), 102.

⁵ Hospers, *Introduction*, 104.

⁶ Cited in Hospers, *Introduction*, 102.

⁷ Hospers, *Introduction*, 102.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), A19/B3.

⁹ Kant, *Critique*, A19/B33.

supposed idea derived? And if it is impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion...¹⁰ The implication of this is that a man who has never experienced pain can never have the idea of pain and a man who has never experienced fear cannot have the idea of fear, while the person who has never experienced sensations of sexual activity cannot have the idea of such sensations, even though she might have heard or observed people having sex.

Suggests four ways of characterizing “concepts”. First, if the subject can “apply the word x correctly.”¹¹ Second, if the subject “is able to define x correctly.”¹² Third, if the subject can “distinguish x from y and z , and indeed, everything that is not an x .”¹³ Fourth, if the subject has “some criterion-in-mind... having some kinds of ‘mental content’ independent of words and distinguishable from objects.”¹⁴ The second criterion seems too narrow to be accepted because there are many words we seem to know very well that cannot be defined appropriately. Even, the compilers of dictionaries sometimes have difficulty with words such as “red” which are really simple ideas but not definable.

To define concepts in terms of the ability to distinguish between things will amount to claiming that a child who is able to distinguish cats from dogs and pigs and all other things, has the concept of what a cat is even though he cannot analyse what it takes for an animal to be a cat. Would it then mean that a dog which can distinguish a cat from a bird possesses the concept even though it has no word for it? The ability to distinguish between x and y is not enough to ascertain whether one has the concept or not. Defining concepts as having some criterion-in-mind

will also amount to suggesting that the mind can have some kinds of “mental content” independent of words distinguishable from objects. For example, one may have a concept of something that is a reptile, larger than an elephant that flies through the air. At least, the fact that such a creature is not in existence does not foreclose the possibility of having such a concept; and to define concepts in terms of correct application of words will amount to reducing concept formation to mere linguistic achievement. Therefore, to have the concept of redness or orangeness will mean the ability to apply the word “red” or “orange” correctly anytime it is used in a language.

However, if having concepts is the function of correct-usage of words in language, then which one comes first, language or thought? Thought cannot be functional without “sensing”. It only strives midst of language. Can language ever get started without thought? Humans developed their senses early enough before language was developed. They, indeed, use their senses (introspection and extroception) to experience the phenomenal world before concepts are ever developed. notes that “the phonemes of our mother's tongue seem to have a start in *utero* but sentences emerge only after a year or two of childhood.”¹⁵

Scientific investigation reveals that by three years, most children “glibly generate sentences, and have the basic grammar right.”¹⁶ Pinker also posits that “language is not a cultural artefact that we learn the way we learn to tell time... Instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological make-up of our brains.”¹⁷ This is an indication that we comprehend sentences as the stream of words is transparent to us and we see through to the meaning automatically. On this note, Pinker calls language a “mental

¹⁰ Cited in Hospers, *Introduction*,

¹¹ Hospers, *Introduction*, 108.

¹² Hospers, *Introduction*, 108.

¹³ Hospers, *Introduction*, 108.

¹⁴ Hospers, *Introduction*, 108.

¹⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (London: Dent and Dutton, .

¹⁶ Donald Davidson, “Seeing through Language,” *Supplement to Philosophy*, 42, (1997), 19; J. Quilty-Dunn, (2020). “Concepts and Predication from Perception to Cognition,” *Philosophical Issues*. 1-20.

¹⁷ Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, (New York: Harper, 1995), 18.

¹⁸ Pinker, *Language Instinct*, p.18.

connection between language and thought and to establish the existence of an innate or genetically programmed internal language, called, *mentalese*¹⁹ (the language of thought). Pinker argues that there is an inner language that emerges as part of our genetic heritage prior to any spoken language. He compares the child to Quine's radical translator. The only difference in his comparison lies in the fact that the child simply knows automatically what idea is represented to him in *mentalese* by the words he hears, but the radical translator does not. For Pinker, the *mentalese* has priority over language because it is acquired first. He argues that since we do not think in English or Yoruba, then it becomes necessary for thinking to have some salient medium in the brain such as the language of thought or *mentalese*.

Language is learned and is characteristically dynamic, yet it develops closely with thought: it is quite closely related to, even though different from, thought. In other words, if concept is entailed in language and better understood and expressed in language, then it cannot be innate. Among human developmental stages, thought is primary while language is secondary. So, thought necessarily precedes language.

Concept in the Contemporary Period

In contemporary times, *concept* is taken to be an abstract idea representing something in a language. Robert defines concept in terms of:

An abstract idea or a mental symbol which is typically

associated with a corresponding representation in language or symbology that denotes all of the objects in a given category or class of entities, events, phenomena, or relationships between them.²⁰

In this sense, a 'concept' is not only an abstract idea representing something in a language but something universal in nature which can be applied to all things in their extension.²¹ As words are basic semantic elements to a sentence so are concepts basic elements to a proposition.²² Concepts are bearers, not agents, of meaning.²³ Therefore, a single concept can be expressed in a number of languages. For example, "dog" can be expressed as *dog* in English, *aja* in Yoruba, *kare* in Hausa, *chien* in French, or *perro* in Spanish. This fact makes translation possible without alteration in meaning. Translations are based on the kind of concept formed about experience, not on the structure of a language *per se*. Stalnaker further explains:

The notion of perceptual content begins with the idea that what is said in a speech act (the proposition expressed), can be abstracted from two different aspects of the way it is said: first, from the means used to express it, and second, from the force with which it is expressed.²⁴

Apart from this, a proposition can be the content of an assertion in one context and of a supposition (a component of a disjunctive assertion) or a request in another. It is possible that the content of what is expressed in a speech act is the same as the content of the mental state of a different kind. Just as

¹⁹ *Mentalese* is a genetically programmed language of thought. According to this theory, this inner language is not learned but emerges as part of our genetic heritage, and it is prior to any spoken language. The essential feature of *mentalese* is that it does not depend on the development of language but vice versa. See Donald Davidson, "Seeing through Language" *Supplement to Philosophy*, vol. 42 (1997): 19.

²⁰ Robert Stalnaker, "What Might Non-Conceptual Content Be?" In York Gunther, (Ed.). *Essays in Nonconceptual Content*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, 95f.

²¹ Diego Zucca, *Defending the Content View of Perceptual Experience*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2015).

²² Stalnaker, "What Might Non-Conceptual Content Be?" 96.

²³ Nicolás Alessandroni and Cintia Rodríguez. "On Perception as the Basis for Object Concepts: A Critical Analysis." *Pragmatics & Cognition*. 26 nos.2/3, (2019), 321-356.

²⁴ Stalnaker, "What Might Non-Conceptual Content Be?" 96.

mental representation or the kind of mental state (belief, wish, tacit presupposition, hope or fear) the proposition specifies. Two persons might say the same thing even though one says hers in French and the other says his in English. It seems *prima facie* reasonable then to say that when something merely looks to the subject in a certain way, even though she does not really believe it is truly that way, it does not rule out the fact that she still has some representational content in her perceptual experience. The fact is that she is in a certain perceptual state, regardless of whether her belief is correct or not.

Explains concept in line with the principle of objectivism where concept is taken to be something “derivable from and do refer to the facts of reality.”²⁵ So, any concept that lacks correspondence with objective facts is not genuine at all. For him, “concepts are formed in the context of available knowledge.”²⁶ So, a young child who is able to differentiate dogs from cats and chickens, need not explicitly differentiate them from deep-sea tube worms, or from other types of animals not yet known to him, to form the concept of “dog”. He explains consciousness in terms of identification; and by this, he means that “reason” is “the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by the senses”.²⁷ For the empiricist, the mind at birth is *tabula rasa*; therefore, the senses serve as a pre-condition for conceptualization. It is now how sophisticated our conceptual capacity is that determines what it can comprehend and interpret. Anything that falls outside the

experience (culture, biological make-up or an already formed belief) engendered by the subject remains non-conceptual.

What concept one forms can then be narrowed down to one's ability to organize and interpret the *repertoire* of information deposited into the mind by the senses. Concepts are mere extrapolations of the vast *repertoire* of the perceptual fields of the perceiver.²⁸ The conglomeration of these fields is integrated into a unified mental unit (concept) which is later symbolized in words or statements of a language.

The Phenomenon of Concept and the Conceptualist Account in Perception

What exactly do we mean by “conceptual content”? It is a content of a kind that can be ascribed to judgment and belief.²⁹ By this, conceptual content can then be understood as that which has identities conforming to Frege's criterion of identity for *sense* and *reference*. Concepts, by this criterion, are constituent of that intentional content that can be the complete, truth-evaluable, component of judgment and belief. The contents of “p” and “q” are distinct if and only if it is possible for someone to rationally judge that “p” without judging that “q”.

The conceptualists argue that no representational content is devoid of recognition or demonstration; hence, all perceptual contents are necessarily conceptual. McDowell sees experience as strictly a conceptual achievement.³⁰ For him, every experience is subsumable under concept, whether as belief or judgment and any experience that cannot be put under concept should be regarded as irrelevant to

²⁵ Ayn Rand, “Objectivism,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concept>, 1990, par.15-28.

²⁶ Rand, “Objectivism,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concept>, 1990, par.15f

²⁷ For more on Rand's theory of concepts, see Rand, 1990: 15-28, Kelly, David “A Theory of Abstraction” and “The Psychology of Abstraction”, *Cognition and Brain Theory*, vol. vii, no 3 and 4 (Summer/Fall 1984) and Rasmussen, Douglas, B., “Quine and Aristotelian Essentialism”, *The New Scholasticism* 58 (Summer, 1984).

²⁸ Hilary Putnam, “Sensation and Apperception,” in S. Miguens and G. Preyer (eds.), *Consciousness and Subjectivity: Philosophical Analysis*, 47, (2012), 39f.

²⁹ Bill Brewer, “Perceptual Experience Has Conceptual Content.” in Ernest Sosa, & Matthias Steup (Eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 89-112; Federico Castellano, “Non-conceptualism, Observational Concepts, and the Given,” *Theoria: An International Journal for Theory, History and Foundations of Science*, 33 no.3, (2018), 401-416.

³⁰ John McDowell, *Mind and World*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 44f.

so, one cannot imagine any experience devoid of belief, as “nothing can simply be a reason for a belief except another... belief.”³¹ Therefore, only beliefs can serve as reason for other beliefs.³² But, if the only rational ground for a belief is other beliefs, then would we not be running the risk of a vicious circle? And perhaps, what would be the role of sensation in perceptual experience? We can implicitly deduce from McDowell's line of thought that he endorses the fundamental rationalists' insight which suggests that “to be aware of something in the sense that such awareness can serve as evidence for beliefs amounting to knowledge is to bring it under a concept.”³³ In corroboration of this view, summarizes it by saying that “concepts are necessarily and instantaneously captured in perception.”³⁴

McDowell fails to see any reason why perceptual experience should be divided into non-conceptual and conceptual content since they are of one and the same experience. He argues that the process of judgment does not introduce a new kind of content into one's perceptual experience; instead, it “simply endorses that conceptual content or some of it that is already possessed by the experience on which it is grounded.”³⁵ If this is the case, then McDowell's argument is self-contradictory and faulty. However, McDowell further vindicates the non-conceptualists' account accepting that experience is more fine-grained than the concepts, beliefs and judgments we possess, because the entire content of our perceptual experience is not always endorsed by our beliefs and judgments.³⁶ If the non-conceptualist's claim is true, then McDowell's position that the content of perceptual experience is necessarily conceptual would be wrong.

Giving McDowell a second reading exposes more inconsistencies in his

argument on the status of the content of perceptual experience. Sometimes, he accepts that non-conceptuality is possible but that it is not relevant to perception, and at another time, he gives the impression that non-conceptuality is not possible at all. He admits two kinds of beliefs which are acquired non-inferentially: one, by the exercise of reliable dispositions to respond differently to stimuli or reporting elements of the causal chain which culminates in the report; and two, by mere non-inferential observation. In genuine perception, he argues that the belief is the result of endorsing the content of a perceptual experience but in mere observation, the belief is acquired blindly. He claims that under the right circumstance, one merely finds oneself with the belief in question. However, this sort of belief formation is not a case of facts becoming visible and generally perceptible to us. Although these beliefs are non-inferentially elicited from the believer by environmental stimuli, the warrant for those beliefs is in an important sense inferential. The believer's justification for beliefs of this sort depends on drawing conclusions from an antecedent claim of reliability. In this respect, he accepts that the believer himself is in the same situation with the observer.

McDowell does not construe perceptual experience as something involving the sort of endorsement characteristic of judging or believing, but of content that is *judgeable* and *believable*; which means that the content of perceptual experience is itself not judgments or beliefs. So, when a perceiver advances from perceptual experience to judgment or belief, the experience only serves in the capacity of justifying the resulting commitment, no more no less. This signifies McDowell's endorsement of the Fregean approach, which construes facts as true thought: “thoughts” not in the psychological sense of thinking, but in the

³¹ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 44.

³² McDowell, *Mind and World*, 63.

³³ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 64.

³⁴ Hamlyn, “Perception, Sensation and Non-Conceptual Content,” 144.

³⁵ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 49.

³⁶ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 49.

argument seems to rule out the possibility of perceptual mistakes, because we sometimes cannot tell the difference between the cases in which we are having a perceptual experience whose content tallies with reality and cases where there is no such reality to be perceived at all.

Traditionally, this argument has been attacked from the perspective of the famous “Argument from Illusion” where the perceiver has perceptual experience and the same content common to both veridical and non-veridical cases.³⁷ McDowell’s objection to making distinction between conceptual and non- conceptual content is however not epistemological but semantic. His doctrine of semantic empiricism is only to show that if we can make this feature of our thought and talk intelligible for perceptual experience, then we can make it intelligible for any claim or belief. For him, the only thing a veridical perceptual experience and a corresponding hallucination have in common is that their subject cannot separate them apart but that their experience differs.

McDowell declares that perceptual experience is “immediate” in the same sense that the conceptual abilities are required, so, there is no need for making any distinction between them.³⁸ He claims that concepts are instantaneously acquired in perception and that the conceptual content for making judgment by inference is the same as the perceptual content for observation. The only visible difference lies in the wrong application of concepts when we express them in language. In truth, the ways in which concepts are brought into perception sometimes fall short of judgment or belief but the same content is presented to the potential knower for endorsement. An act of judgment is only required to endorse it. So, the problems arising from us are not judgment but only petitions from our judgment. This explanation is necessary because McDowell does not merely want to make a distinction in our perceptual experience so as to make intelligible the

sense in which we are rationally responsible for our perceptual judgments. Notwithstanding, his argument here seems inadequate because it is difficult to see how contents are *judgeable* and yet not endorsed by judgment. A picture merely entertaining judgeable content, awaiting the exercise of an act-of-will without judgment is here questionable.

Judging knowledge from a dispositional point of view, we can distinguish between animals and humans. A parrot could be taught to respond to red things by uttering the noise “that is red” but it would not be saying or claiming that anything was red. To lay claim on something is to make an assertion about that thing. To make a claim requires commitment to provide evidence for such a claim which no other animal can provide. There is a wide difference between what a reporter can be trained under some circumstances to say or do and what concepts he/she possesses by applying those concepts to responsive dispositions.

Strictly going by McDowell, it will mean that to be aware of something is just to apply concepts to it, which is, making a judgment or undertaking a doxastic commitment regarding the awareness. Awareness deserves to be called “immediate” just in case it is not the product of a process of inference. Therefore, beliefs acquired non-inferentially, especially through the exercise of reliable dispositions to respond differently to stimuli of a certain sort, is yet conceptual even though it embodies immediate awareness of the items reported. In McDowell’s account, this is the only sense of “immediate awareness” where we can understand our perceptual knowledge of the world around us.

A reliable non-inferential response to events does not necessarily mean that one has concepts of such events. Observational/non-inferential knowledge should be distinguished from cases of genuine perceptual knowledge. What McDowell often refers to as knowledge

³⁷ See arguments from illusion; Tim Crane, “The Waterfall Illusion”, *Analysis*, 48, (1988), 142-147.

³⁸ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 45f.

under observational knowledge. But at times, when we see colours or shapes, we have perceptual experiences corresponding to the judgment from which we can go on to make claims or form beliefs without having genuine knowledge about them. We sometimes respond blindly and still trust such blind responses only to discover later the actual truth about such experiences.

Brewer claims that perceptual experiences justify beliefs and, as such, “sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs.”³⁹ He, therefore, conceives perceptual experience as that with rational relations to judgment and beliefs to the extent that its spontaneity is already implied in its reception.⁴⁰ This will only apply if we take experience as having conceptual content in the same sense as conceives it.⁴¹ Sellars also sees concepts as the sole responsibility of the correct use of words.⁴² For her, having concept involves mastering the use of words. Therefore, if a word is properly used, it is believed that one has the concept. So, for Sellars, no one can understand the concept “red” unless he knows what it is for things to look “red” and make an appropriate use of the word.

Davidson, in “Seeing through Language”, describes language as a means by which we talk about the world but not the act of conceptualizing it.⁴³ If this is the case, then language is a vehicle for conveying concepts and not their maker. Language may not reproduce for the mind the accurate records of the world; if it does, how come the cases of distortions or illusions? He defines language as:

A convenient human skill which we use in coping with one

another in our common terrestrial setting. Without it we would not think of things, as we do. But it does not follow, of course, that we never perceive how the world really is, as Kant thought, or that every view is necessarily distorted, as Bergson and many other have held.⁴⁴

We can then make a deduction from the above quotation that perception is quite separable and independent of language. The absence of language does not really rule out perception. If we can, at least in principle, isolate some given aspects of perceptual experience, which cannot be shaped by the mind, how do we then classify such aspect? Perhaps, it should be best described as non-conceptual.⁴⁵

Sensation and Perception

Sensation simply refers to the process of sensing the environment through touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell. Information gathered from sensation is sent to the brain in raw form where perception comes into play. Perception is the way we interpret the signals from sensations and make sense out of them. However, percepts are not spontaneously interpreted or understood while perceiving the environment; depending on the level of development of the mind and already accrued experience, there are always some left-over (non-conceptual content). Sensation is a passive process whereby information from the outside (the environment) is brought in contact to the body and brain: it is a passive process because the subject need not be conscious of the “sensing” process; whereas perception is a deliberate and conscious

³⁹ Bill Brewer, “Perceptual Experience Has Conceptual Content,” in Ernest Sosa and Matthias Steup (eds.); *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 89f.

⁴⁰ Alex Byrne, “Perception and Conceptual Content,” in Ernest Sosa, & Matthias Steup (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 231.

⁴¹ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 162.

⁴² Wilfrid F. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science 1*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253.

⁴³ Davidson, “Seeing through Language,” 15f.

⁴⁴ Davidson, “Seeing through Language,” 15.

⁴⁵ Robert Hanna, *Cognition, Content, and the A Priori: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind and Knowledge*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

phenomenon.⁴⁶ The subject is conscious and actively involved in the process of perception. Perception is therefore a deliberate attempt by the subject in selecting, organizing, and interpreting data brought to bear on the brain by the senses.⁴⁷

In human perception, a large number of information is sensed every minute, ranging from room temperature to the brightness of lights in the room. But, are all sensations cognized instantly? We sometimes hardly notice radio waves, x-rays or other microscopic parasites crawling on our body; not all odours or tastes do our senses notice because of the limited pattern of our thresholds. For an absolute threshold, everything becomes noticeable to the senses. For example, at the softest of sound, one can hear and at the slightest touch, one can feel (some animals are uniquely gifted in sensing some percepts); but anything less than this goes unnoticed by the senses.

For sensation to occur, therefore, sensory organs absorb energy from the physical stimulus in the environment; the receptors then convert this energy into neural impulses and send them to the brain. But for perception to occur, the brain organizes the raw data collected from sensations and translates them into something meaningful. Meaningful information are concepts derivable by the brain process and influenced by psychophysics; that is, the study of how physical stimuli are translated into psychological experience. This mainly comprises of *selective attention* and *perceptual expectancy*. The former is influenced by what motivated perception while the latter is influenced by our past experience, culture and biological make-up.

For example, the subject does not expect a cow to fly or a tree to speak when he perceives them. Better still, the subject may observe a painting and not really understand the intended message of the art until someone explains it to him. There and then, things that were formerly meaningless may become obvious and the intended message is unravelled.

Conclusion

Even though sensation and perception are complementary, they play different roles in cognition. While sensation is the process by which the senses (touch, taste, sight, sound and smell) gather data from the environment and are sent to the brain for interpretation, perception is an already processed data in the brain that represents information about the perceived environment. Perception is simply the way that we interpret sensations and conceptualize them. corroborates this dichotomy by arguing that sensibility is independent of understanding.⁴⁸ He describes understanding as a logical, discursive and proposition-forming capacity of the mind which produces concepts as output and sensibility as the affective, perceptual and imaginal capacity of the mind that produces intuition as output. If this is granted, then, sensibility and understanding are separable. Therefore, if it is possible to conceive the two separately, then the raging controversy of whether non-conceptuality is possible in perception naturally dissolves. At least, what the perceiver forms as concept depends on his past experience, culture and biological make-up, and since not all that are sensed are conceptualizable or immediately conceptualized, there is room for non-conceptuality in perception, hence, conceptualism cannot be right.⁴⁹ However,

⁴⁶ Ryan Simonelli, "The Normative/Agentive Correspondence," *Journal of Transcendental Philosophy*, 3 no.1, (2022), 71-101; Ryan Simonelli, "Can the Content of Perception Be Conceptual?" Unpublished manuscript presented at the University of Leipzig, 16 July 2019. Accessed 30 December 2021, http://www.ryansimonelli.com/uploads/1/3/3/4/133499356/simonelli_-_can_the_content_of_perception_be_conceptual.pdf.

⁴⁷ See "Psychology of Sensation and Perception" in www.alleydog.com/101notes/s&p.html. Gestalt psychology is also an excellent expose of how and why perception is possible.

⁴⁸ Kant, *Critique*, A51/B76.

⁴⁹ Christopher Gauker, "Three Kinds of Nonconceptual Seeing-as," *Rev. Phil. Psych.* 8, (2017), 763-779.

this notion is gradually being replaced by a form of “perceptual pluralism” in most recent epistemology.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ Jake Quilty-Dunn, “Perceptual Pluralism,” *Noûs*. 54 no.4, (2019), 807-838; and Jake Quilty-Dunn, “Concepts and Predication from Perception to Cognition,” *Philosophical Issues*, 30 no.1, (2020), 273-292.

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