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Color-consciousness conceptualism ☆

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ABSTRACT

I defend against a certain line of attack the view that the conscious contents of color experiences are exhausted by, or at least matched by, the concepts brought to bear in experience by the perceiver. The line of attack is an allegedly empirical argument against conceptualism—the Diachronic Indistinguishability Argument (DIA)—based on color pairs the members of which are too similar to be distinguished across a memory delay but are sufficiently distinct to be distinguished in simultaneous presentations. I sketch a model of a conceptualist view of conscious color perception that is immune to the DIA. One distinctive feature of the conceptualism on offer here is that it does not rely upon the widely discussed and widely criticized demonstrative-concepts strategy popularized by John McDowell and others. I offer empirical and philosophical considerations in my criticisms of the DIA and my sketch of my non-demonstrative conceptualism.

0. Introduction

Is there a mismatch between what we experience and what we conceptualize that might be best described in terms of *fineness of grain*? Are our experiences of color, in particular, more fine-grained than we are able to grasp in conceptualized thought? The goal of the present paper is to defend against a certain line of attack the view that conscious experience of color is no more fine-grained that the repertoire of non-demonstrative concepts that a perceiver is able to bring to bear in perception. The line of attack in question is an alleged empirical argument—the Diachronic Indistinguishability Argument (DIA)—based on pairs of colors sufficiently distinct to be discriminated when presented side-by-side but too similar to be discriminated across a memory delay. The DIA was developed by Raffman (1995) and it or arguments similar have been endorsed by Kelly (2001a) and Prinz (2007, pp. 192–193).[1,2] My aim here is to show that this argument fails. My aim is not to give arguments in favor of the kind of conceptualism I favor. I do that elsewhere (Mandik, 2008, unpublished).

The organization of the remainder is as follows: In Sections 1–3 I spell out further preliminaries and relevant historical background. In Section 4 I spell out the Diachronic Indistinguishability Argument and in Section 5 I spell out my main criticism of it. Sections 6–9 are dedicated to objections and replies.

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[1] As I interpret the DIA, and as it seems, Raffman intends it, it is an empirical argument. I have doubts about whether Kelly (2001a) endorses the empirical argument. He seems, at least in places, to instead have an a priori argument in mind. See, especially his remark, "It is perfectly *conceivable*, in other words, and there is nothing about the nature of perception to keep it from being true, that our capacity to discriminate colors exceeds our capacity to re-identify the colors discriminated." (p. 411, emphasis added).

[2] For discussion of the empirical evidence that, in various sensory modalities, our abilities of perceptual discrimination are more fine-grained than our memory and categorization abilities, see (Burns & Ward, 1977; Halsey & Chapanis, 1951; Hardin, 1988a; Hurvich, 1981).

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1. Demonstrative and non-demonstrative conceptualism

At the center of many core debates concerning whether perceptual experience has nonconceptual content are conceptualists who lean on a notion of demonstrative concepts to fend off worries about experiential fineness of grain. Especially prominent examples are McDowell (1994, 1998) and Brewer (1999, 2005). I will call such conceptualism "demonstrative conceptualism" for its reliance on demonstratives.

I will contrast demonstrative conceptualism with a view I will call "non-demonstrative conceptualism." Note, however, I do not take the difference between demonstrative and non-demonstrative conceptualism to be a disagreement over whether there are such concepts as demonstrative concepts. The non-demonstrative conceptualist can remain neutral on that question. The key contrast, as I intend it, is over whether considerations having to do with fineness of grain are best dealt with by appeal to demonstrative concepts. In the present paper I will be defending a version of non-demonstrative conceptualism.

There are several motivations for conceptualism. And though the following is not intended to be exhaustive, it will nonetheless be useful to note a few of them. I will sort the motivating considerations into those that are primarily epistemological and those that are primarily metaphysical.

Epistemological motivations for conceptualism. One epistemological consideration motivating many conceptualists, and perhaps the motivation most discussed in the debates over whether perceptual experience has nonconceptual content, is the idea that perceptual experience serves to justify empirical beliefs, and can only play this justificatory role if it itself is, like the empirical beliefs it justifies, a conceptual state (Bengson, Grube, & Korman, 2010; Brewer, 1999, 2005; McDowell, 1994). Another epistemological consideration that has motivated some philosophers is the thought that we have an especially high degree certainty about our own conscious states that is best accounted for by denying that our conscious states have an existence separable from our conceptualizations (thoughts, judgments, etc.) of them (Horgan & Kriegel, 2007, pp. 135–138; Lynch, 2006; Mandik, 2008, unpublished; Rey, 1991, p. 100, 1993, p. 250).

Metaphysical motivations for conceptualism. Many theories of consciousness are argued for on the premise that a conscious state's being conscious consists in one's being conscious *of* the state, and that this consciousness of the state is implemented by one's having a representation of the state (Carruthers, 2004; Kriegel, 2003, 2006; Lycan, 1996; Rosenthal, 2005; Van Gulick, 2004). On some versions, especially the higher-order thought theory of consciousness as defended by David Rosenthal, in order, for example, to be conscious of one's perception as being of some color shade, one must have a suitable higher-order thought of that shade, which in turn requires that one have the conceptual resources needed to capture that color (2005, pp. 188–189). A distinct metaphysical motivation for holding conceptualism is less focal than that of the higher-order thought theorists. Instead of relying on a *specific* claim on the requirements on *conscious* states, this distinct motivation makes a *general* claim about mental states (conscious and nonconscious alike) by way of a certain kind of appeal to parsimony: by seeking to explain all mental states as conceptual, we achieve a satisfying parsimony in our theorizing about the mind (Rey, 1991, p. 93, 1993, p. 248).[3]

The motives so far discussed are general motivations for adopting conceptualism. These general motivations do not alone suffice to motivate the particular version I am calling demonstrative conceptualism. The motive for demonstrative conceptualism arises in response to worries having to do with the fineness of grain of the conscious experience of color. The basic idea here is that without a recourse to demonstrative concepts, there just are not enough concepts possessed by a person to account for all of the colors that the person is nonetheless able to consciously perceive. To illustrate: a person may be able to perceive, perhaps on two separate occasions, two shades of red that differ in some slight way. If the person conceives of each of them simply as red, then it looks like there are differences in the perceived shades that outstrip the way they are conceived, since they are conceived in the same way. But by allowing, in addition to the concept RED, demonstrative concepts such as THIS SHADE and THAT SHADE, the demonstrative conceptualist prima facie provides for as many conceptualizations of colors as colors consciously perceived.

There have been various criticisms waged against demonstrative conceptualism (Dokic & Pacherie, 2001; Eilan, 2001; Kelly, 2001a,b; Peacocke, 1998, 2001; Prinz, 2007). For present purposes, it will do to just focus on two general lines of complaint against demonstrative conceptualism.

The first line of complaint stems from what we might call the object-involving or externalistic individuation conditions on demonstrative contents. Such conditions are plausible and independently motivated. But this is not the problem. The problem is that also plausible and independently motivated are certain conditions on the phenomenal character of perceptual experience, conditions that seem not to appropriately "line up" with the aforementioned conditions on demonstrative

[3] Rey (1993) writes: [B]y assimilating [qualitative] experience to [propositional] attitudes, we explain the essential *unity of the mind*, what it is that makes beliefs, desires, memories, hopes, fears *and* sensations all states of *the same sort of entity*. What are sometimes proposed as rival accounts seem to me to lack this unity. For example, biologistic or dualistic accounts that regard qualia as biological or as entirely non-physical properties of a computationally organized brain have trouble explaining how a mind that thinks by computing manages to feel by being in some further *non*-computational relation to such further properties. The further properties seem gratuitous and accidental: unless they were somehow *represented* in that life, how could they be any more a part of a person's mental life than the colour of their brain? But then why should not the representations be enough, whether or not there are the corresponding properties? (p. 248). It should be noted that there is a bit of a wrinkle involved in counting Rey as a conceptualist. In his (Rey, 2007) he writes that on his view, sensational representations are 'non-conceptual' (scare-quotes, Rey's) for not freely combining with each other (p. 115). Further, on Rey's view, there are no qualia, just the contents of phenomenal concepts (p. 130). On one reading then, Rey is a conceptualist for denying that qualia have any existence beyond the contents of certain concepts. On a different reading though, Rey is a nonconceptualist for his view that sensational representations aren't concepts.