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The conceptualist understanding of perceptual content

Doctoral dissertation

Summary of theses

Budapest, 2009

1. Choice of topics and aims of discussion

In my dissertation I explore and defend the conceptualist understanding of perceptual content. The central thesis of this conceptualist approach is that the content of perception has conceptual nature analogous to the contents of linguistic and cognitive mental representations. This claim is denied by the so-called nonconceptualist understanding of perceptual content, which claims that the representational content of perception has nonconceptual nature.

The debate between conceptualist and nonconceptualist understanding of perceptual content is one of the most significant and interesting issue of current analytic philosophy. The problem's significance derives from the fact that in order to understand the relation between mind and world, conceptual thinking and nature, which is independent of this conceptual sphere, it is crucial what to think about perception, which connects these two spheres. Thus, we can conclude that the issue of conceptualism has consequences pointing over the philosophical theories of perception or the whole analytic philosophy of mind. Despite its significance and actuality, the topic has – to my knowledge – no monographic exposition in the analytic literature, and almost no mention in the Hungarian literature. So the main aim of my dissertation is to create a thematic monograph which nonetheless commits itself to the conceptualist approach. The only exception is the Appendix, where the focus is not on the thematic exploration of the discussed points, but on the demonstration of the role this topics played in the classical German philosophy, namely in the epistemology of Hegel and Kant.

2. Methods

The aims sketched above require mainly analytic methods opposed to historical or author-centered approaches. While analyzing the main points of the debate between conceptualist and nonconceptualist understandings of perceptual contents and in defending the conceptualist understanding I tried to elucidate the main notions of the essay, to state clearly and separate firmly the positions in the debate, and most importantly to show the arguments for and against the conceptualist standpoint in an accurate form – as accurate as I can do. By doing this my aim was to create a unified conceptual framework, in which one can easily grasp the debated claims, the possible positions and the strength of the arguments supporting these positions. However, I know very well, that trying to match these requirements of clarifying and accurateness make the text a little bit uneasy to read, but I think this price is worth to pay. Nevertheless, in the course of writing I always made an effort to create a text as fluent as possible.

The chosen analytic method did not make possible the detailed discussion of the relevant philosophical considerations of the main figures in the debate. However, this does not mean that the upshot of the dissertation does not employ any idea of these authors. For example, in the course of exploring the claims and arguments of the conceptualist standpoint I heavily relied on the two main contemporary conceptualist work, namely on John McDowell's *Mind and World* (1994) and on Bill Brewer's *Perception and Reason* (1999), and on the vast number of their articles in the topic. The most important difference between these works and the current essay consists in the fact that while for these authors the conceptualist understanding of perceptual content is only a part – although a very important part – of a greater philosophical project, for me it is the locus of my investigations. Focusing on these wholesale projects makes both McDowell and Brewer avoiding to discuss in details nonconceptualist understanding, to explore the very nature of the debate and to offer a precise formulation of what it means to attribute conceptual content to a representational state. Contrary to them, in the course of the dissertation I try to account systematically for the nonconceptualist arguments and theories, and for the question what it is to attribute conceptual or nonconceptual content to a subject's perceptual state.

The historical investigations in the Appendix naturally required a quite different methodology. Here my main aim was not to elucidate and appreciate the arguments of the opposite standpoints – although I tried to keep in mind the requirements of clarity here too –, but to underpin the claim that some parts of the investigated thinkers', namely Kant's and Hegel's philosophy can be interpreted coherently and smoothly with the notions and terminology of current conceptualist and nonconceptualist theories. About this historical part of the essay it is important to say that it does not pretend to explore a wholesale historical and philological account. I was only interested in the thinking of these great philosophers to find out in what extent the notions, standpoints and arguments of contemporary conceptualist and nonconceptualist understandings can “read into” their works.

3. Main points of discussion

1. The understanding of the debate in terms of the subject-centered state conception.

In Chapter 1 I try to make it clear what the main point of the debate between conceptualist and nonconceptualist understanding of perceptual content is. I argue that the basic question of the debate is whether the same abilities of the subject are present when she is in a perceptual state as when she is in a cognitive state, which is doubtlessly considered as having conceptual content. So, in my understanding, the conceptual or nonconceptual feature is not attributed di-

rectly to the content of a perceptual state, but through the abilities of the subject of that perceptual state. From this it follows that the debate is about the relationship of the subject's perceptive and cognitive abilities and not about how we have to account for the propositional content of perception. In other words: whether a perceptual state has conceptual or nonconceptual content will depend on whether the subject has to possess the relevant concepts and be able to apply them in order to be in a perceptual state. The relevant concepts are relevant from the point of view of the canonical specification of representational contents. So we qualify a perceptual content as conceptual or nonconceptual in terms of the properties of the subject's perceptual state, and not in the terms of one or another theory of propositional content. This is the state conception of the debate, as opposed to content conception, for which I argue in the essay.

2. Inferential potential as the mark of conceptual contents

In Chapter 2 I examine the question, in virtue of which features we qualify a perceptual content as conceptual and nonconceptual. What properties of a representational content make it conceptual and how does it relate to the abilities of the subject of the content? I reply to these questions with identifying conceptual contents with contents that are structured by inferential roles, and from this I argue that one possesses a conceptual content iff she can apply it in a deductive or inductive argument. So conceptual contents are those contents which have inferential potential. Starting from this conception I raise doubts to the so-called Priority Thesis, the claim that only subjects who have mature linguistic competence can possess conceptual content. The inferential abilities are not evidently connected tightly to linguistic abilities, and the nature of their relationship is a basically empirical, not conceptual question. The significance of this argument is that it shows that the example of perceptual contents of nonlinguistic creatures (prelinguistic human infants and brute animals) has perhaps no relevance to the discussed topics.

3. Nonconceptualist approaches have two main motivations

According to my theses, the recent nonconceptualist theories and approaches have two motivational sources. One of them comes from the hope that with the acknowledgement of the possibility of a nonconceptual content of perception, we can explain the origin and content of conceptual mental representations. According to this proposal, by nonconceptual perceptual content we can offer a straightforward, non-circular empirical explanation to the problem of concept-acquisition and of the content of conceptual representations. So it is understandable, why this requirement of empirical explanation is closely connected to naturalistic accounts of

intentionality in the works of many nonconceptualist theorists. The other main motivation for acknowledging the possibility of nonconceptual perceptual content is phenomenological. Namely, many nonconceptualists think that the perceptual representation and its content has several, mainly phenomenological features which are incompatible to some facts we know about conceptual contents. To demonstrate this incompatibility nonconceptualist thinkers have put forward many arguments which serve to exhibit this incompatibility between some features of the phenomenology of sensory experience and one or more of the traditional marks of conceptual content.

4. Nonconceptualist arguments and theories do not offer any plausible evidence to the possibility of nonconceptual content of perception.

In Chapter 3 I survey the well-known and less well-known nonconceptualist arguments and some nonconceptualist theories. These arguments are motivated mainly from the aforementioned second problem, i.e., the truth of their premises are grounded in the phenomenological features of perceptual experience. In the course of the presentation of these arguments I argue that they are inconclusive, thus cannot confirm enough to force us to suppose the existence of nonconceptual content of perception. I think their failure has two types and sources. The first type of failure is that some arguments only prove that the contents of perception has other features than the contents of beliefs or other cognitive representations – a fact which need not be denied neither by the conceptualist theorist. The other failure is that some arguments of nonconceptualists ignore completely demonstrative, token-sensitive concepts, and only take care with general concepts, which are insensitive to the features of the context of perception. Analogously to these failures, the exhibited nonconceptualist theories can be divided into two types. Regarding the first one, it can be questioned that they postulate a perceptual state with real representational content. Contrary to this, by the second type of these theories it is indeed conceptual rather than nonconceptual content that they attribute to perceptual state. In this chapter I examine shortly the problem of the so-called Autonomy Thesis, which is debated between nonconceptualist theories. The thesis claims that in order to possess a nonconceptual perceptual content one need not possess any concept, either it figures in the perceptual content or not.

5. *The most important argument to the conceptualist understanding of perceptual content is the argument from the justificatory and reason giving role of perceptual content, which argument is conclusive.*

The central part of the conceptualist argumentation can be found in Chapter 4 of the dissertation. In this chapter I explicate the argument from justificatory and reason giving role of perceptual content, which states that our perception can justify and give reasons to our beliefs, which is possible only because they have conceptual content. In the course of the explication I speak about the motivations for the commitment to the premises of the argument, about why we have to attribute rational and epistemic role to perceptual states and why this role is to be played by justificatory relationship. Starting from these considerations I divide the theories concerning the relation between perceptions and beliefs into three groups, namely conceptualism, nonconceptualism and coherentism about empirical beliefs. To underpin the premises of the argument from justificatory and reason giving role of perceptual content, I develop further transcendental arguments, which serve to prove that neither to perceptual states nor to empirical beliefs can we attribute representational content, except if we suppose that they stand in a justificatory and reason giving relation to each other.

6. *Nonconceptualist considerations against the premises of the argument from the justificatory and reason giving role of perceptual content convey no plausible reason to reject these premises.*

In Chapters 5 and 6 of the essay I examine the possible and real nonconceptualist argumentative strategies against the argument from justificatory and reason giving role of perceptual content and the possible conceptualist answers to them. The first strategy depends on casting doubts on the necessity of justificatory and reason giving relations between perceptual contents and empirical beliefs, and posits rather some other relation, e.g. abstraction or conceptualization between them. As I said earlier, this kind of nonconceptualist considerations are interconnected to some theory of naturalizing intentionality, since for the defender of this strategy the nonconceptual content of perception does not arise from some rational reason giving relation to empirical beliefs, but rather can be regarded as an informational content defined by purely naturalistic terms. So in the essay I survey shortly the most important attempts to naturalize intentional semantic contents and the problems of these attempts. From the result of this survey I argue, on the one hand, that these problems are so vast, that it might not be worthwhile to pay this price just for embracing a nonconceptual understanding of perceptual content. On the other hand, with many conceptualist authors I argue that the difficulties of these

attempts show that what naturalizing theories can define is just a subpersonal informational content and not the real personal perceptual content. The other nonconceptualist strategy against the argument from justificatory and reason giving role of perceptual content attacks the claim that rational reason giving relation is possible only between fully conceptual contents. For this standpoint one can argue with the support of some externalist conception of justification, or with the aid of a two-stage structure model of justification. In the course of evaluating these considerations I try to point out that, on the one hand, the nonconceptualist cannot help himself with leaning on an externalist theory of justification, because these models cannot grasp the specific reason giving role of empirical justification. On the other hand, applying the two-stage model of justification cannot succeed, because this strategy leads to implausible results and – just as the other position – the model firmly contradicts to our intuitive beliefs about the specific epistemic role of perception.

7. *In perceptual content some demonstratively identified elements are always there, and in order to be regarded as conceptual, these elements have to meet some reidentification or track-keeping constraint.*

In Chapter 7 I examine which conditions must be satisfied, the necessarily present demonstrative elements of perceptual content to be regarded as conceptual elements. There necessarily are some demonstratively identified elements in the perceptual content, since if there were no such element, the content of perceptual experience cannot grasp the particular object of perception in its particularity. Nevertheless, the demonstrative identification in itself cannot contribute conceptually to the content containing it, because this claim would make every perceptual content *per definitionem* conceptual. Thus, I argue that the demonstrative identification must satisfy further conditions in order to be regarded as resulted in conceptual element in a representational content. Consequently, in the course of this chapter I examine the proposed conditions in the literature – mainly the condition of reidentification and the condition of track-keeping –, and whether every perceptual act containing elements depending on demonstrative identification meets these constraints. This latter question is especially crucial, since the conceptualist thesis that every perceptual state has conceptual content depends on the right answer to this question.

8. *Robert Brandom's phenomenalist and inferentialist model of representational content can be employed by the conceptualist theorist to explain the origin of conceptual contents.*

In the last chapter of the dissertation I examine the problem of origin and acquisition of conceptual contents. As I said earlier, in my view the strongest motivation to admit the possi-

bility of nonconceptual content of perception sources from the fact, that with supposing such a content one can easily give an elegant and – more importantly – non-circular explanation to the problem of the origin of conceptual contents. Though I acknowledge the importance and the difficulty of this challenge, in this chapter I argue that this possibility is open for the conceptualist too. On the one hand, in discussing this problem, demonstrative concepts, by which one can explain the origin and acquisition of general concepts, are often forgotten. To my mind, however, it is not enough for the conceptualist theorist to refer to demonstrative concepts – she must give a general explanation to the origin of semantic content of conceptual representations and to the acquisition of conceptual abilities. In order to find such an account, I examine first shortly John McDowell’s conception of “second nature”, and reject it, because I think it is too dusky and serves only rhetoric aims. However, according to my suggestion, we can solve the problem of the origin of conceptual contents from a conceptualist point of view with the aid of Robert Brandom’s phenomenalist and inferentialist model of representational content. By the end of this chapter I try to convey a short summary of Brandom’s model and its possible application to our problem

9. Some aspects of Hegel’s epistemology can be regarded as an example of contemporary conceptualist theory, while, by contrast, Kant’s notion of intuition shows close affinity to current nonconceptualist approaches.

The Appendix of the essay contains the results of my historical investigations in the topic. My main goal is to point out that some aspects of Hegel’s philosophy can be regarded as a defense of a contemporary conceptualist standpoint, which he set forth against Kant, mainly in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In consequence of this, I try to argue that many features of Kant’s epistemology, contrary to Hegel’s, ties it closely to the contemporary nonconceptualist understanding of perceptual content. So contrary to the general belief, I think the Kantian analysis of experience is rather nonconceptualist than conceptualist.