

# In Defense of Conceptualism of Perceptual Content: Through Understanding the Concept of Experience in McDowell's *Mind and World* <sup>1</sup>

Mineki Oguchi  
The University of Tokyo

## Abstract

John McDowell, who is the most famous advocate of “conceptualism”, insists that contents of perceptual experience are “conceptual” all the way down. However, not a few philosophers have an impression that McDowell’s view is counterintuitive and mysterious. Their criticisms against McDowell’s view of perception can be summed up in the following four points, (1) perception of infants and animals, (2) unrevisability, (3) immunity to contradiction, (4) fine-grainedness. For responding such doubts, first, I shall elucidate the view McDowell’s conceptualism adumbrates, dealing with both the concepts of “concept” and of “experience.” And then, with the accomplishment of this clarification, I shall reply to each doubt above in defense of McDowell’s conceptualism.

## I Introduction: Experience as Co-operation between Spontaneity and Receptivity

In his slogan “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”, Kant sums up the central doctrine which contemporary conceptualists took over. By conceptualism I mean a stance which insists that contents of perceptual experience are “conceptual” all the way down. As is well known, John McDowell is the most famous representative of conceptualists. In his book *Mind and World*, he diagnosed the predicament that the traditional conception of experience poses, and tried to cure it by proposing a renewed conception.<sup>2</sup> In his view, contents of perceptual experience are not only obtained by sensible intuitions as operations of receptivity, but also structured by conceptual capacities as operations of spontaneity. In other words, perceptual experience obtains its contents through inseparable co-operation between spontaneity and receptivity (p.9).

His aim of proposing conceptualism is to cure the characteristic predicament of modern philosophy—predicament about how we locate “the logical space of reasons” (W. Sellars), which is governed by spontaneity, within the empirical world. As suggested by Quine’s term “the tribunal of experience”, the logical space of reasons should be vulnerable to pressure for a revision from experience. Otherwise, we cannot regard our empirical thoughts as representing how things are. In other words, the logical space of

reasons needs external constraint imposed by experience to avoid emptiness. He insists that the constraint should be not only 'causal' but also 'rational' (p.14): that is, our experiences must be able to form reason-giving relations with thoughts through their contents and thereby to revise our belief-system.<sup>3</sup>

However, many philosophers faced the dilemma between a pair of unsatisfying positions that is, "the myth of the Given" and "Coherentism", since they—whether implicitly or explicitly—presupposed that contents of experience are nonconceptual. On the one hand, the myth of the Given takes experiences as nonconceptual and asserts that such experiences can form reason-giving relations with thoughts. On the other hand, Coherentism also takes experiences as nonconceptual but restricts their role to causal constraint on thought, insisting that we can form reason-giving relations only by appealing to consistency among beliefs. As McDowell argues, these two positions cannot show us any satisfying view, since they both deprive experience of its role in giving external rational constraint.<sup>4</sup> Against this predicament, McDowell gives the following diagnosis. He claims that contents of experience are not nonconceptual but rather conceptual, since—as Sellars pointed out by the words "naturalistic fallacy"<sup>5</sup>—to form a reason-giving relation, the two relata must be conceptually structured. To put it like a Kantian slogan, "experiences without conceptual contents are blind". Based on this prescription, he proposes to redefine our conception of experience:

The relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity. [...] It is not that they are exercised *on* an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content. (p.9)

We should not think that a nonconceptual content comes first in experience, that conceptual capacities are then exercised on it, and that, finally, an empirical thought is obtained. Rather, we should think that conceptual capacities are actualized in experience—in other words, spontaneity is actualized in receptivity—and that such "co-operation between spontaneity and receptivity" shapes a content of an empirical thought. In a veridical experience, we take in facts already conceptually structured, and then these facts saddle rational constraint upon relevant observational thoughts and upon the logical space of reasons as a whole through the holistic distribution of justifications. Thus, McDowell performed, as it were, an operation to give sight to experience through taking over the Kantian doctrine in rethinking the conception of experience.

However, not a few philosophers have an impression that McDowell's

conceptualism is counterintuitive and mysterious. We can resolve such an impression into the following questions. For example, if we take experience as conceptual, do we miss an obvious fact that infants and animals (which have no conceptual capacities) have the ability to perceive something? If perceptual experience is conceptual, why does it not show revisability like thought? We can have contradictory contents in, say, Waterfall Illusion. Why don't you think this is apparent evidence that perceptual content is nonconceptual? Perception has much finer-grained contents than thought does. How do conceptualists deal with the distinction between them?<sup>6</sup> Partly because of such an impression, many philosophers have found "nonconceptualism" more convincing.<sup>7</sup> According to nonconceptualists, contents of perceptual experience are nonconceptual, and we can make a clear distinction between perception and thought in terms of this feature.<sup>8</sup> In addition, they claim that we can attribute appropriate perceptual contents to infants and animals without any problems, insofar as they exercise relevant capacities for perceptual discrimination.

In this presentation, I shall first clarify what McDowell's conception of experience is, in order to cast away such counterintuitive appearances, referring to various pieces of his work written after the *Mind and World*, as a preliminary for my response to the doubts which nonconceptualists cast on his position (§ II ~ § III). And, second, with the accomplishment of this clarification, I shall try to reply to each question above in defense of McDowell's conceptualism (§ IV ~ § VII).

## **II Conceptual Capacity as Responsiveness to Reasons**

When insisting that contents of experience are conceptual, how does McDowell understand the term "concept"? I shall elucidate his understanding of the concept of "concept" through this question.

McDowell characterized concept descriptively in terms of thinker's "capacity." We can get into the very concept of concept through an idea that the paradigmatic case of conceptual capacities being actualized is their exercise in "thought." As Evans indicated by the idea of "the Generality Constraint", we cannot acknowledge something as conceptual capacity if I can exercise it only in just one thought, that is, if it lacks proper generality.<sup>9</sup> For instance, one who has the concepts of "red" and "square" should be able to exercise the capacity to use them in various relevant thoughts. So one who can think that there is a red square in front of me has to be able to think, for example, both that there is a red triangle in front of me and that there is a blue square in front of me. Therefore, conceptual capacity has such generality in point of its actualization.

As just described above, conceptual capacity possesses generality at the level

corresponding to “words.” In addition to this, it also possesses its own structural property at the level corresponding to “sentences.”<sup>10</sup> That is to say, any propositional attitude is “rationally” linked to other relevant attitudes. For example, your belief that the weather is miserable at the moment is established by some beliefs (that it is raining now), supportive of others (that the open-air concert in the afternoon will be cancelled), and susceptible to yet others (that it is not raining but a broken sprinkler playing on your window.)<sup>11</sup> Our propositional attitudes actualized as exercises of conceptual capacities have complicated reason-giving relations among themselves.

McDowell characterized conceptual capacity by the “responsiveness to reasons”<sup>12</sup> —to be able to be aware of reason-giving relations and respond to them—which he picks out from the context of thought. It is a requirement for something to have a function as concept that it gives constitutive contributions to reason-giving relations, and it is a requirement for someone to have conceptual capacities that she can respond to these relations.<sup>13</sup> He says “conceptual capacities in the relevant sense belong essentially to their possessor’s rationality in the sense I am working with, responsiveness to reasons as such.”<sup>14</sup>

McDowell stated that the conception of concept noted above leaves open the possibility of actualizing conceptual capacity outside the paradigmatic context, that is, outside thought.

[McDowell’s conception of concept] leaves room for conceptual capacities, in the very same sense, to be actualized in non-paradigmatic ways, in kinds of occurrence other than acts of judging.<sup>15</sup>

It is perceptual experience that he bears in mind as another occurrence in which conceptual capacities are actualized. If we accept his conception that characterizes conceptual capacity by the responsiveness to reasons, it is conceivable that experiences providing thoughts with their reasons are, even in non-paradigmatic ways, the same kind of occurrences as thoughts. Then, how should we understand the “actualization of conceptual capacities in experience”? (Here only its possibility is left open) And, in what respects does it differ from the “actualization of conceptual capacities in thought”? I shall deal with these points in the next section.

### **III Receptivity of Experience and Rational Entitlement**

We can characterize conceptual capacities exercised in thought as free operations of spontaneity (in the Kantian sense.) There are possibilities of the free selection open to

us about what judgments we make, based on deliberative considerations by inference.<sup>16</sup> Even in perceptual judgments (generally supposed to involve no reflection), we have freedom to choose whether or not we accept what our experiences present to us (as in the case of acquainted illusory figures) in principle. In this sense, operations of spontaneity in thoughts are active. As opposed to thought being active, operations of receptivity as sensitive capacities are passive.

[...] one's control over what happens in experience has limits: one can decide where to place oneself, at what pitch to tune one's attention, and so forth, but it is not up to one what, having done all that, one will experience. (p.10, n.8)

Whatever extent we exercise our activity when choosing what we perceive, perceptual experience necessarily has such minimal passivity. "In experience one finds oneself saddled with content." (p.10) Thus its contents are available for us prior to any choice. Perceptual experience can impose external rational constraint on the freedom of spontaneity, precisely because operations of receptivity are passive.

In order to harmonize the activity of thought and the passivity of experience, McDowell distinguished "exercise" of conceptual capacity from its "actualization."<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, in thought, conceptual capacities are actualized as active exercises. On the other hand, in experience, although not exercised, they are passively actualized. When we perceive that things are thus and so, relevant conceptual capacities are passively actualized, and as such, they co-operate with receptivity for obtaining the perceptual content. If so, what is the "passive actualization" of conceptual capacity different from its active exercise?

McDowell thought that the experience being structured by passive actualization of conceptual capacities is the equivalent of the experience giving rational entitlement to relevant judgment for accepting its content.<sup>18</sup> To understand the concept of "rational entitlement", I shall introduce arguments exchanged between McDowell and B. Stroud.

Stroud insisted that rational relations can be established only among propositional attitudes.<sup>19</sup> In his view, mere propositions without attitude can only logically imply a certain proposition and cannot justify, support, or warrant it. For instance, suppose that someone testifies that the suspect was far away from the crime scene that night. For the testimony to become the reason to trust his innocence, the witness has to "believe" the propositional content of the testimony, whether it's true or not. Something that can contribute to reason-giving relations is limited to items toward which the thinker is taking a certain attitude.

Stroud thought that the same holds for experiences. It is because perceptual experiences involve certain attitudes, such as endorsement or acceptance, even though they are not active, that they play a justifying role toward beliefs. In this respect, there is no difference between the reason-giving relations established between two beliefs and those between a belief and a perception, just because both relations are established between certain kinds of propositional attitudes.

Against Stroud's view, McDowell argued that perceptual experiences don't involve propositional attitudes but that, even so, they can build reason-giving relations with beliefs.<sup>20</sup> Suppose that, when one visited a psychological laboratory, her attention was engaged by one of experimental setups and that she casually peeped out through the observation hole fixed on it.<sup>21</sup> She saw there being a blue ball. At that time, she believed that she was not in a position to judge about the true color of that ball since she didn't know anything about the mechanism of the setup. Later she was informed by the experimenter that there was nothing distorting her vision in the setup, and then she turned to endorse the perceptual judgment she first withdrew. In such a case, we can evidently tell that she saw the ball to be blue at the time but cannot tell that she endorsed or accepted the proposition that the ball is blue as true at the same time.<sup>22</sup> She withheld determination of her attitude toward the proposition "the ball is blue."<sup>23</sup> Note that such "withdrawal" is made for other "attitudes" such as endorsement or acceptance, but not for these "contents." The attitude of "withdrawal" is a higher-order attitude which cancels another attitude in its scope. Thus, to withdraw an endorsement of perceptual content is equivalent to enjoying perceptual content without any attitude. In the above case, she canceled her withdrawal later on, took the attitude of endorsement afresh, and then incorporated the initial perceptual belief into her belief-system. Therefore, perceptual experiences can build reason-giving relations with propositional attitudes, even though they don't contain any attitude in themselves.

As discussed above, we have to distinguish taking some attitude toward a perceptual content from enjoying a perceptual content. McDowell insists that to enjoy a perceptual content is not to accept its content, but to "be entitled" to accept it. He explains a perceptual impression by taking an "invitation" as an analogy.<sup>24</sup> We are free whether to accept an invitation or not, while we are not free whether to receive it or not. Similarly, a perceiver is entitled to decide whether to endorse a perceptual content or not by passive enjoyment of it.<sup>25</sup> McDowell calls such an invitation to judgment, which an experience gives to a perceiver, "rational entitlement."

The entitlement relation established between a perceptual experience and a perceptual judgment is clearly different in its mode of relation from the inferential

relation established only between judgments, since the former contains a passive element which the latter doesn't. Moreover, these two kinds of relations are different on the point that, in the inferential process, the contents of relevant judgments are rearranged, while, in the entitlement process, the content of a judgment stays unchanged from the original perceptual one. In the latter process, all the content gains is additional attitude-taking. The content on which an attitude is taken, however, is only a part of the contents which the experience itself has. For the contents of an experience are far richer than the ones thinkers use in their actual judgments.<sup>26</sup> We can decide which portion we use in our judgments among such rich contents imposed on ourselves. But, in principle, we have no control over the enjoyment and over the determination of our perceptual contents.<sup>27</sup>

Now, we can conclude that a passive actualization of conceptual capacities in a perceptual experience is an acquisition of rational entitlement to take some attitude toward conceptual contents of experience. The role of conceptual capacities actualized in experiences is to establish entitlement relations with thoughts and thereby to impose rational constraints upon perceptual beliefs. As many philosophers recognized, perceptual judgments are normally "non-inferential", that is, not mediated by any inference. Once we understand that the role experiences play in making judgments is "rational entitlement", we can count not only inferential but also non-inferential entitlement relations as a kind of reason-giving relations. These two kinds of relations are both "conceptual" ones, which show the responsiveness to reasons, but they are clearly distinguished by their modes of relation.

In the end of this section, I shall answer the following question. As I have mentioned repeatedly, conceptual contents of experience are obtained by the co-operation between spontaneity and receptivity. However, if we characterize the conceptual capacities as operations of spontaneity, and if the faculty of spontaneity has "freedom" as its nature, how could spontaneity operate in passive experiences? How could we recognize the capacities without freedom as operations of spontaneity?

In the previous section, we argued that conceptual capacities must be subject to the Generality Constraint. In order to be recognized as conceptual capacity, the capacity passively actualized in an experience must be able to be exercised not only in an observational judgment, but also in various active judgments away from the observational one. McDowell says "the capacities that are drawn on in experience are recognizable as conceptual only against the background of the fact that someone who has them is responsive to rational relations, which link the contents of judgments of experience with other judgeable contents." (pp.11-12) In other words, we can recognize

the capacity as conceptual if and only if it is tied with the network of relevant reason-giving relations and actualized against the network as its background. It is membership to such a network that enables the capacity passively actualized to be acknowledged as a conceptual capacity, that is, an operation of spontaneity.

In these two sections, we elucidated the view McDowell's conceptualism adumbrates, dealing with both the concepts of "concept" and of "experience." Of course, this elucidation is limited, and not enough to provide the full overview of McDowell's position. But, for the present purpose, it is sufficient. Based on the above arguments, I shall respond to various doubts, which are raised by nonconceptualists, in the following sections.

#### **IV On the Perception of Infants and Animals**

In the next four sections, I shall restrict my focus to just four questions which I mentioned in § I; (1) perception of infants and animals (given that they don't have conceptual capacities), (2) unrevisability, (3) immunity to contradiction, (4) fineness of grain. Nonconceptualists think that these four points are problematic for conceptualists, and that, at the same time, they provide positive evidences to take perceptual contents as nonconceptual. If conceptualists can properly deal with these questions, then, on the one hand, this increases the validity of conceptualism, and, on the other hand, nonconceptualism loses its supports which are supposed to be gained from these points. In this sense, these four doubts will become the very touchstone of conceptualism.

Let's start with the following criticism.<sup>28</sup> If we admit, like McDowell, that perceptual contents are conceptual, do we shut infants and animals away from perceptual contents, and, as a result, do harm to the truism that they can also perceive? Does McDowell fall into the difficulty to miss the obvious fact about perception, because of his greater emphasis upon the point that possessors of concepts have a peculiar kind of perceptual contents tied with thoughts?

In this relation, G. Evans, who is the precursor of nonconceptualism, tried to pay serious attention to the point that creatures without concepts have a perceptual ability, and also to characterize the aspect of perception peculiar to adults by distinguishing "(mere) perception" from "perceptual experience."

According to him, the information which a subject accepts from the world through her senses is nonconceptual. The nonconceptual contents which her informational state has are conceptualized by the act of subject's judgment, and this conceptualization takes the subject from her being in the informational state to her being in the cognitive state which has conceptual contents.<sup>29</sup> The informational states serve as input to the motor

system which most animals including us have, but, particularly for subjects who have conceptual capacities, the same states can also serve as input to the reasoning system. The system which embodies the informational state is more “primitive”<sup>30</sup> than the reasoning system, and infants and animals without the latter system share the former system with adults. It is possible for a sentient creature to possess the perceptual informational state, whether it has conceptual capacities or not, so infants and animals can be in the same informational state as adults.

What’s more, Evans emphasized the need for distinguishing “perception” from “perceptual experience”: a creature without consciousness has the former, but only a conscious subject has the latter. He claimed that, for mere perception to become perceptual experience, it is necessary not only that some perceptual informational state is actualized in a conscious subject, but also that the information is available as input to her reasoning system, because a conscious subject may be in a perceptual informational state and yet cannot make use of the content as input to her reasoning system, as in the case of blindsight.<sup>31</sup>

By distinguishing perceptual experience from mere perception, Evans ensured both the fact that infants and animals have a perceptual ability and the point that adults have perceptual experience peculiar to possessors of concepts. If McDowell sacrificed the former fact in order to ensure the latter point, Evans gains the edge on him about these issues.

McDowell responded to the problem in the following way. As just mentioned, Evans insisted that adults share the same kind of contents of perception (viz. nonconceptual contents) with infants and animals and that only adults can conceptualize the contents by the act of judgment. But, we can undermine the presupposition that we ought to admit the same kind of contents for perception of adults and that of infants or animals, if once we think like this:

Instead we can say that we have what mere animals have, perceptual sensitivity to features of our environment, but we have it in a special form. Our perceptual sensitivity to our environment is taken up into the ambit of the faculty of spontaneity, which is what distinguishes us from them. (p.64)

In the above quotation, McDowell admitted the common perceptual “ability”, that is, “receptivity”, between adults and infants or animals, but denied the common perceptual “contents” between them. In the adult’s perception, receptivity obtains its contents by co-operation with spontaneity, thus adults receive the different kind of contents from

infants and animals (viz. conceptual contents) in perception. In this way, we can say that McDowell also introduced the distinction between “perception” and “perceptual experience” into his view—but in a different perspective from Evans. On the one hand, the word “perception” means “the operation of receptivity in general.” On the other hand, the phrase “perceptual experience” means “the operation of receptivity actualized in co-operation with spontaneity.” Based on this idea, the doubt posed for McDowell will disappear; the doubt that he would miss the obvious fact that infants and animals perceive their environment. What he denies is not such an obvious fact but rather a false assumption that they have the same kind of perceptual contents with adults.

## **V The Unrevisability of perception**

T. Crane, who is one of the advocates of nonconceptualism, insisted that the “unrevisability” of perception shows the inadequacy of “the belief theory of perception”, and took it as an evidence of nonconceptuality of perceptual contents.<sup>3 2</sup>

The proponents of this theory construe perception as a certain sort of “the acquisition of belief.” But they don’t naively equate the two. They add some reservation to their view. If one looks at the Müller-Lyer illusion, given she is familiar with it, then she will refuse what appears to her to be her belief and believe another content obtained through some routes other than her vision. Thus the proponents define perception as “the *prima facie* inclination to believe” and say that, in the case of the familiar Müller-Lyer illusion, the inclination to believe will be canceled by another rival belief.<sup>3 3</sup>

According to Crane, however, there is a sharp distinction between perceptual inclinations to believe and non-perceptual ones. (A non-perceptual inclination is one that some beliefs have toward other beliefs. A belief has non-perceptual inclinations to believe another if and only if the latter is inferentially derivable from the former.) On the one hand, non-perceptual inclinations will be immediately disappeared when conclusive evidence is presented against the inclinations. On the other hand, perceptual inclinations will remain unchanged even when conclusive evidence is presented. For instance, the Müller-Lyer illusion continues to show its illusory appearance even when conclusive evidence of its falsehood is presented, say, by measuring the lengths of its two arrows. Thus a belief is easily revisable but a perception is not. The view that takes perception as the inclination to believe, therefore, fails to grasp the unrevisability, which is a distinctive feature of perception.

Crane claimed that it is a strong evidence for the nonconceptuality of perception that perception doesn’t have revisability which a belief apparently has, since conceptual capacities are the faculties of spontaneity, and spontaneity is characterized by having

revisability on the basis of reasons.

But this criticism of Crane's does not affect McDowell's conceptualism at all. As described in § III, McDowell claimed that spontaneity is incorporated not only in thought but also in experience, and distinguished "active exercise" of conceptual capacities in thought from "passive actualization" of them in experience. By distinguishing between them, we can harmonize the point that beliefs have revisability but that perceptions do not. Perceptions are not revisable because of their "passivity." Conceptual capacities incorporated in perception are, as opposed to their active exercise in thought, passively actualized by inseparable co-operation with receptivity. We cannot select our perceptual contents freely even by the operation of spontaneity, but contrarily we are passively saddled with them by the world. That's why perceptual experience is able to play the role of external constraint upon thought.

From above considerations, we can conclude there is no need to concede that the unrevisability of perception is a stable evidence of its nonconceptuality. Conceptualists can adequately explain the same feature with their own resources, and thus nonconceptualists cannot claim their superiority over conceptualists by bringing it in.

## **VI The Immunity to Contradiction of Perception**

Crane also defended the nonconceptuality of perception from another point of view.<sup>3 4</sup> It is the point that perception is immune to contradiction unlike belief, to put it more precisely, tolerable of a content which presents a contradiction when conceptualized. In illustration of this, he focuses attention to a well-known illusion called "Waterfall Illusion", more generally called "motion aftereffect." If you stare for a period of time at a waterfall, and then turn your attention away from the waterfall to a stationary object such as a stone, the object will appear to move in the opposite direction to that of waterfall, namely, appear to move upward. Crane said, "Although the stationary object does appear to move, it does not appear to move relative to the background of the scene." Hence he claims that the object appears to stay still and move at the same time, that is to say, Waterfall Illusion contains a contradictory perceptual content describable like this; "the object is moving and isn't moving at one time."

If perception is tolerable of such a contradictory content, McDowell's view seems to be faced with a serious doubt.<sup>3 5</sup> It is one of the basic restrictions for belief that we cannot believe a contradictory content with awareness of its being contradictory. But the case of Waterfall Illusion shows us that we can have a conscious perception which contains a contradictory content. If perception has conceptual contents like belief, why is it tolerable of such a contradictory content? If, as McDowell insists, the contents of

perception are conceptual like those of a belief entitled by them, perception ought to be intolerable of a contradictory content as a belief is. So, if the content of experience can be contradictory, should it be nonconceptual?

We can throw doubt on Crane's interpretation about Waterfall Illusion based on experimental evidence. He insisted that it is our "phenomenology" that shows Waterfall Illusion to be containable of a contradictory content.<sup>36</sup> This is because Waterfall Illusion is purported to give an appearance that an object is moving and its position is unchanged at the same time. However, a recent cognitive study shows that, in the experience of motion aftereffect, apparent movements are accompanied with changes of apparent positions, though the speed of the latter is much lower than that of the former.<sup>37</sup> In the experiment, a subject is first shown two windmill patterns rotating around the opposite directions for a given time, and immediately after the rotations are stopped, she is shown the same static patterns. As a result, with apparent rotary motions, she experiences gradual shifts in orientation in the direction of the illusory rotation. If the illusory rotation in motion aftereffect involves apparent changes of positions, there is no need to interpret the phenomenon as containing a contradictory content. The "phenomenology" of motion aftereffect, on which Crane placed undue reliance, didn't correctly describe the perceptual content. Thus Crane's criticism that Waterfall Illusion becomes a counter-example against McDowell's position is seen as lacking in persuasiveness.<sup>38</sup>

The criticism from nonconceptualists was that conceptualism is wrong because perception is tolerable of a contradictory content. But we can conclude from the above argument that the criticism is based on the disputable claim about the purported immunity to contradiction of perception. Thus we have no need to respond to the doubt and can readily reject it.<sup>39</sup>

## **VII The fineness of Grain of Perceptual Content**

At last I shall consider the fourth doubt to the effect that perception has fine-grained contents which cannot be grasped by any concepts.<sup>40</sup> According to nonconceptualists, contents of perception we discriminate through our senses is far more accurate and detailed than those of judgment we conceptually formulate. Our senses normally present us contents at the level of specific "determinacy", while our concepts articulate them only at the level of certain "generality." I can't grasp all the various colors the leaves on the trees outside my window exhibit on my eyes, whichever color concept (such as "green", "olive", or "evergreen") we use. If perceptual experience has such fine-grained contents which are beyond our conceptual grasp, will this become

an obvious evidence for nonconceptualism?

Against this question, McDowell cast his doubt on its assumption, which nonconceptualists had tacitly accepted, that the concepts we can use when we try to grasp the content of experience is limited to general concepts, say, describable by terms such as color names. He said:

It is possible to acquire the concept of a shade of colour, and most of us have done so. Why not say that one is thereby equipped to embrace shades of colour within one's conceptual thinking with the very same determinateness with which they are presented in one's visual experience, so that one's concepts can capture colours no less sharply than one's experience presents them? In the throes of an experience of the kind that putatively transcends one's conceptual powers—an experience that *ex hypothesi* affords a suitable sample—one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like “that shade”, in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of the sample. (pp.56-57)

In his strategy, McDowell appealed to a “demonstrative concept” which is fixed by indicating a “sample” (viz. an instantiated property of a perceptual object). This kind of concept is expressed in the form of “the demonstrative + the sortal” such as “that shade.” What content a thought including such a demonstrative concept has depends on the actual instantiated property perceptually indicated by the thinker.

McDowell claimed that one can embrace any content which is exactly as fine-grained as perceptual one in her thought by using a demonstrative concept. We can bring the whole perceptible shades to our thought by using demonstrative concepts, since they are fixed by perceptual indication. If demonstrative concepts are actualized in experience in this way, we can sweep aside the nonconceptualists' criticism that our thought cannot grasp fine-grained content like perception and that, as a result, we don't have to admit any more that the fineness of grain of perception is a stumbling block for conceptualism.

McDowell examined in advance one of doubts which may be posed against his strategy. In what sense can we recognize a demonstrative concept as a genuine concept at all, taking into account the point that a demonstrative concept is different from other general ones in that it is generated each time we perceive something?

As mentioned in § II, a conceptual capacity has to satisfy the Generality Constraint, namely, has to be exercisable in various thoughts other than the very one in which the concept in question first appeared. McDowell claimed that for a

demonstrative concept to meet the constraint, it ought to be exercisable beyond the duration of the relevant experience. Thus, the capacity to exercise demonstrative concepts should be a “recognitional capacity” which we apply to other tokens belonging to the same property type. (p.57) We can take a demonstrative concept as being eligible for a genuine one, as long as it persists as a manifestation of the recognitional capacity, even if it is short-lived.<sup>4 1</sup>

C. Peacocke argued against McDowell’s strategy.<sup>4 2</sup> According to him, there ought to be a one-to-one relation between a fine-grained shade perceived and a demonstrative concept grasping it, otherwise we wouldn’t admit that the content of the thought including the concept properly captures the content of perception. However, we can apply different demonstrative concepts to one and the same shade perceived in the same way, such as “that shade”, “that red”, or “that scarlet.” Thus the relation between a shade perceived and a demonstrative concept grasping it is not “one-to-one” but rather “one-to-many.” It follows that contents of perception are, on the one hand, fine-grained compared with general concepts, but, on the other hand, coarse-grained compared with demonstrative concepts, so that we cannot capture them whether by the former concepts or the latter. If so, the content of experience should not be taken as conceptual at all. Despite his intention, McDowell’s strategy proposed to defend conceptualism is exposing its being on the rock.

In addition to the above criticism, Peacocke considered one of predictable surrebuttals. According to him, McDowell may try to secure the one-to-one relation against Peacocke’s criticism by introducing a stipulation that one must form a demonstrative concept by using the most specific concept in her repertoire (for instance, one who possesses the more specific concept “scarlet” as her most specific one must use “that shade”, while one who possesses only the less specific concept “red” as her most specific one must use “that red”, etc.). But, if different perceivers using different demonstrative concepts have the same content of an experience under the same condition, then, even after employing the stipulation, it is possible to apply more than one demonstrative concept for one and the same content of an experience. Thus we cannot successfully reply to Peacocke’s criticism by such a stipulation.

The above assumption is dubious that “different perceivers using different demonstrative concepts have the same content of an experience under the same condition.”<sup>4 3</sup> But even when we accept it, McDowell can respond in the following way. By improving his argument in the *Mind and World*, he proposes a new idea that one can use a different demonstrative expression like “...is colored *thus*” instead of expressions such as “that shade”, “that red”, or “that scarlet.”<sup>4 4</sup> The expression “...is colored *thus*”

directly refers to the way a perceiver experiences a shade, and captures it in one-to-one correspondence. Thus the expression makes no difference between the content of a perception of a shade and that of a demonstrative thought grasping it, in terms of their fineness of grain. McDowell's own surrebuttal was, instead of choosing a suitable one among expressions which correspond to a content of experience in one-to-many relation, to introduce an expression which corresponds to the content in one-to-one relation without the choice by stipulation. We can thus say that it was a more natural response than the one Peacocke predicted.

From the above argument, it follows that the criticism concerning the fine-grainedness of perceptual contents does no harm to McDowell's conceptualism. We can embrace any perceptually discriminable content in thought with demonstrative concepts, and so there is also no difficulty in saying that an experience has the same kind of content as a thought—namely, conceptual content.

### **VIII Provisional Conclusion**

I summarize what I have argued in my presentation. McDowell's conceptualism claims that operations of spontaneity are passively actualized in a perceptual experience by co-operation with those of receptivity and participate in forming the perceptual contents. He proposed a potent view about the way our thoughts are rationally constrained by the world, by taking contents of experience as conceptual. His view showed the third way which indicates an escape from the dilemma of the Myth of the Given or Coherentism. We can characterize conceptual capacities by the responsiveness to reasons. They are passively actualized in experience and, as such, establish an entitlement relation, a kind of reason-giving relation, with thought. An experience entitles a thinker to take some attitude toward its contents. The logical space of reasons gets a proper constraint by the world through such a rational entitlement imposed by experience on thought.

As I have argued, all the four points on which nonconceptualists rely as their central grounds don't constitute effective attacks against McDowell's conceptualism. He handles the perception of infants and animals respectfully, with the distinction between "perception" as an operation of receptivity in general and "perceptual experience" as an operation of receptivity actualized in co-operation with spontaneity. Conceptualists can harmonize the revisability of belief and the unrevisability of perception, with the distinction between "active exercise" and "passive actualization" of conceptual capacity. What's more, we can readily dismiss the immunity to contradiction of perception since it lacks a proper support, and also we can manage the fineness-of-grain of perception by

applying the idea of “demonstrative concept.” If all the above arguments are successful, nonconceptualist cannot utilize these points as their evidence without further consideration. They have to search for another basis for them.

I have tried to consider whether McDowell’s view is consistent and persuasive or not along several main points and to defend it against nonconceptualists. At the first glance, McDowell’s conceptualism seems to be counterintuitive. But once unveiled, we can understand that it’s robust enough to hold against the central criticisms from nonconceptualists. His conceptualism gives an attractive view about the content of perceptual experience, which is worth advancing more elaborate explorations for it.

## Reference

- Armstrong, D., 1968, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Brewer, B., 1999, *Perception and Reason*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Collins, A. W., 1998, “Beastly Experience”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.58, No.2, pp.375-380.
- Crane, T., 1992, “The nonconceptual content of experience”, in *The Contents of Experience: Essays on Perception*, ed. Crane, T., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp.136-157.
- , 2003, “The Waterfall Illusion”, in *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, ed. Gunther, Y.H., Cambridge; Mass., The MIT Press, pp.231-236.
- Gaynesford, M., 2004, *John McDowell*, Cambridge & Malden, Polity Press.
- Evans, G., 1982, *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Heck, Jr., R. G., 2000, “Nonconceptual Content and the “Space of Reasons””, in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.109, No.4, pp.483-523.
- Kadowaki, S., 2005, “The Normativity of Perceptual Experience”, in *Naturalism and Antinaturalism*, Tokyo, Yuhikaku, pp.29-50.
- Kelly, S., 2003, “The Nonconceptual Content of Perceptual Experience: Situation Dependence and Fineness of Grain”, in *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, ed. Gunther, Y.H., Cambridge; Mass., The MIT Press, pp.223-230.
- McDowell, J., 1994 ; reissued with an Introduction, 1996, *Mind and World*, Cambridge; Mass., Harvard University Press.
- , 1998, “Reply to Commentators”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*,

- Vol.58, No.2, pp.403-431.
- , 2000, “Experiencing the World”, in *John McDowell: Reason and Nature: Lecture and Colloquium in Münster*, ed. Willaschek, M., Hamburg, LIT, pp.3-18.
- , 2002, “Responses”, in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. Smith, N.H., London and New York, Routledge, pp.269-305.
- , 2005, “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, (Manuscript for Presentation in PaSTA symposium at Kyoto university ).
- Nishida, S. & Johnston, A., 1999, “Influence of motion signals on the perceived position of spatial pattern”, *Nature*, 397, pp.610-612.
- Nobuhara, Y., 2002, “Philosophy of Consciousness: Prolegomenon to Qualia”, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten.
- , 2003, “Slippery Clearness : The non-conceptual content of perceptual experience”, *Shiso* No.943, pp.142-160.
- Noë, A., 2004, *Action in Perception*, Cambridge: Mass., The MIT Press.
- Oguchi, M., 2007, “The Conceptuality of perceptual experience: With the Focus on McDowell’s *Mind and World*”, Master’s thesis, The University of Tokyo.
- Peacocke, C., 1992, “Scenarios, concepts and perception”, in *The Contents of Experience: Essays on Perception*, ed. Crane, T., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp.105-135.
- , 1998, “Nonconceptual Content Defended”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.58, No.2, pp.381-388.
- Sellars, W., 1997, *Empiricism and the Philosophy on Mind : With an Introduction by Richeard Rorty a Study Guide by Robert Brandom*, Cambridge: Mass., Harvard University Press.
- Stroud, B., 2002, “Sense-experience and the grounding of thought”, in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. Smith, N.H., London and New York, Routledge, pp.79-91.
- Tye, M., 2006, “Nonconceptual Content, Richness, and Finess of Grain”, in *Perceptual Experience*, ed. Gendler, T. S. and Hawthorne, J., Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp.504-529.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the interest of brevity, in the text below, I will indicate the number of pages in the 1996 edition of the *Mind and World* for quotations and references therefrom.

<sup>2</sup> However, I call McDowell “conceptualist” not because he defines himself as such but rather merely for the sake of convenience for the constitution of my argument. McDowell abhors “the constitutive philosophy” as Wittgenstein did, and carefully avoids

---

defining himself as belonging to some “ism.” Other leading “conceptualists” include, for instance, Brewer (cf. Brewer(1999)), Noë (cf. Noë(2004)), and Kadowaki (cf. Kadowaki(2005)). I will focus only on McDowell’s position and reserve discussion of others to another occasion.

<sup>3</sup> For further arguments, see Oguchi(2007), chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> For further arguments about the dilemma, see Oguchi(2007), chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sellars(1997),p.19. What Sellars criticized there was the claim that it is possible to analyze cognitive items—which are conceptually articulated—by non-cognitive items—which are not articulated (Typically, he was concerned about sense-datum theorists.)

<sup>6</sup> Other possible questions against conceptualism are, for instance: “Doesn’t it invite skepticism by setting experience up as ‘epistemic intermediary?’”, and “Doesn’t it fall into vicious idealism by shutting the empirical world into the realm of subject’s mental activities?” etc. About these questions, see Oguchi(2007), chapter 4 (skepticism) and chapter 5 (idealism), respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Leading “nonconceptualists” are Evans (cf. Evans(1982)), Peacocke (cf. Peacocke(1992)), Crane (cf. Crane(1992)), Heck Jr. (cf. Heck Jr.(2000)), Kelly (cf. Kelly(2003)), Nobuhara (cf. Nobuhara(2003)), and Tye (cf. Tye(2006)).

<sup>8</sup> Evans thinks the content of perception as completely nonconceptual, while Peacocke takes it as partly nonconceptual.

<sup>9</sup> Evans(1982),pp.100-105

<sup>10</sup> McDowell accepted Geach’s proposal that the semantical or logical togetherness of conceptual capacities in judgment is to be understood on analogy with that of the corresponding words in a grammatically structured form. (McDowell(2000),p.10)

<sup>11</sup> I owe Gaynesford(2004),p.22 for these examples,.

<sup>12</sup> McDowell(2005),p.4

<sup>13</sup> McDowell’s intention here was not to define what concept is but rather to confine his usage of the word by stipulation. So, his argument didn’t exclude other usages, like using this word when we attribute concepts to animals in behavioral studies.

<sup>14</sup> McDowell(2005),p.4

<sup>15</sup> McDowell(2000),p.11

<sup>16</sup> On the relation between freedom and conceptual capacity, see Nobuhara(2002), especially chapter 6.

<sup>17</sup> McDowell(2000),pp.11-12

<sup>18</sup> McDowell(2005),p.6

<sup>19</sup> Stroud(2002),p.89

<sup>20</sup> McDowell(2002),pp.277-278

<sup>21</sup> The example is not McDowell’s original. I made it based on his description.

<sup>22</sup> What the example shows is not that “she was taking the attitude of not endorsing what she saw.” There is a clear difference between “to take the attitude of not endorsing something” and “not to take the attitude of endorsing something”, in respect of their epistemological states. The latter has no justifying force, while the former has a negative justifying force.

<sup>23</sup> It may be said that the perceiver accepted the proposition “it looks to me as if the ball were blue” instead of withdrawing the acceptance of the proposition “the ball is blue.” But the content of the former proposition is very different from that of the latter. Concerning how to treat these propositions, see Sellars(1997), section 3 “The Logic of ‘Looks’”. It seems to me that McDowell has agreed to the proposal argued there.

<sup>24</sup> McDowell(2002),p.278

<sup>25</sup> Of course, we need a certain condition in order to receive an invitation. In the case of

---

enjoying a perceptual content, the condition is constituted by the possession of the conceptual capacities corresponding to the content.

<sup>26</sup> McDowell(1998),p.413

<sup>27</sup> One can select which perceptual contents she obtains (namely what she perceives) to some extent by active bodily movements. However, no matter how active the selection is, it is the world which has final power for the determination of her perceptual contents. For instance, one can change undetermined perceptual contents to determinate ones by walking around to the back of the building she sees. But what the determinate contents are depends on how things are.

<sup>28</sup> See Collins(1998) and Peacocke(1998).

<sup>29</sup> Evans(1982),p.227

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*,p.124

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*,p.157

<sup>32</sup> Crane(1992),p.150

<sup>33</sup> This is a theory proposed in Armstrong(1968), chapter 10.

<sup>34</sup> Crane(2003),p.232

<sup>35</sup> Unlike other three questions, McDowell didn't consider the contradiction-tolerance of perception.

<sup>36</sup> Crane(2003),p.234

<sup>37</sup> Nishida & Johnston(1999)

<sup>38</sup> As is well known, in the phenomenon dubbed "binocular rivalry", perception works as if it tries to avoid contradiction. We may be able to interpret the phenomenon of motion aftereffect in the same way.

<sup>39</sup> Like Crane, Nobuhara pointed out that there may be contradiction-tolerance of perception in "perceptual consistency" (Nobuhara(2003), n. 3). About an objection against it, see Oguchi(2007), chapter 6.

<sup>40</sup> Such criticisms appeared in Evans(1982),p.229 and Heck Jr.(2000),p.489.

<sup>41</sup> According to Tye (Tye(2006),p.520), some experiments showed that ordinary perceiver cannot recognize the most fine-grained shade he can discriminate, even after having just seen it. Thus the demonstrative concept applied to the most fine-grained perceptual content cannot work as a "recognitional capacity" which persists over the experience and, in the end, cannot satisfy a requirement for a concept McDowell poses. We may be able to respond to this argument by considering "the possibility of persistence", which McDowell takes as such a requirement, as a mere sufficient condition (not as a necessary and sufficient condition) for a concept. If we may argue this way, it follows that there can be more than one condition which can be invoked in showing that a demonstrative concept satisfies the Generality Constraint, other than the possibility of working as a recognitional capacity. For instance, one can give various judgments with the same demonstrative concept, even in observational cases—this fact will show that the concept satisfies the Generality Constraint. Therefore, a demonstrative concept will not immediately be deprived of the eligibility for genuine concept by Tye's criticism.

<sup>42</sup> Peacocke(1998),pp.381-383

<sup>43</sup> Kelly attacked the assumption, but he defended nonconceptualism in a different way. For Kelly's argument, see Kelly(2003), and for an objection against Kelly, see Noë(2004),pp.201-203.

<sup>44</sup> McDowell(1998),p.415