Eva Schmidt


Most of those working in the philosophy of mind today would agree that thoughts are representational. My thought that dogs bark represents something like the state of affairs that dogs bark—and thus is accurate only if that state of affairs obtains and inaccurate otherwise. But there are many good reasons to think that perceptual experiences are representational too. My visual experience of the computer screen in front of me would seem to represent several of its features, such as its colors and shape. To use a piece of current philosophical jargon, perceptual experiences, like thoughts, have *content*. The content of a state is typically understood to be the way in which it represents the world; it specifies (or simply is) the conditions under which the state is accurate.

Perception and thought, however, would seem to represent things in different ways—so what is the difference between these modes of representation? A common response to this question in the contemporary philosophy of perception is that, while the contents of thoughts involve *concepts* or *conceptual content*, such as the concepts DOG and BARK, perceptual experiences instead have *nonconceptual content*. This distinction, however, has proven to be somewhat obscure.

In her new book, *Modest Nonconceptualism: Epistemology, Phenomenology, and Content*, Eva Schmidt sheds much light on the topic, developing and defending a view that she calls ‘modest nonconceptualism’. Schmidt’s nonconceptualism is modest in part because it holds only that perceptual experience has nonconceptual content; it may have conceptual content as well. She offers a range of arguments for her view, which she maintains is preferable to conceptualist alternatives.

After a brief introductory chapter, Schmidt does an admirable job in chapter 2 presenting and clarifying many of the key notions in the area, many of which have long remained rather unclear. For example, there is much debate regarding what concepts themselves are—they have been variously hypothesized to be abstract Fregean senses, representational mental items, the grounds of certain cognitive abilities, and so on. Schmidt adopts a pluralist approach to concepts, according to which they might be understood in any of these ways. And she proffers a reasonably neutral abilities account of concept possession, wherein concepts are characterized by their roles in enabling us to re-identifying things, draw inferences, and satisfy Gareth Evans’ (1982) generality constraint (the constraint that if one can be in a state with the content that
a is F, then one can also be in a state with the content that a is G). Similarly, there is much debate about the metaphysics of content: are they Fregean propositions composed of senses or modes of presentation, Russellian propositions composed of objects and properties, Lewisian propositions composed of sets of possible worlds, or something else? Here Schmidt assumes, as most do within this literature, that conceptual content is Fregean.

In the course of developing her account, Schmidt discusses in chapter 3 a putative ambiguity in claims about nonconceptualism. Following Richard Heck (2000) and others, Schmidt maintains that there is a distinction between a state's being nonconceptual and a content's being nonconceptual. To say that a state is nonconceptual is to say that one need not possess the concepts that (canonically) characterize its content. To say that a content is nonconceptual is to say that it is not the kind of content that can be the content of cognitive states such as beliefs. And these varieties of nonconceptualism purportedly can come apart. Those who think that a state's having nonconceptual content and being nonconceptual go hand-in-hand endorse what Schmidt calls the 'state-to-content principle', or 'S2C'. Schmidt's modest nonconceptualism is committed to S2C.

According to Schmidt, perceptual experiences are nonconceptual states insofar as it is possible to be in such states without having to be able to exercise every one of the relevant abilities with respect to what they represent (e.g., we need not be able to re-identify what we can perceptually represent). She similarly maintains that perceptual experiences have nonconceptual content insofar as their contents are not (exhaustively) Fregean. Instead, she proposes that perceptual content is best understood as roughly what Christopher Peacocke (1992) has called 'scenario content': a kind of nonpropositional content that specifies how the space around the perceiver is filled in. Unlike the propositional conceptual contents of beliefs, which can be true or false, the content of perceptual experiences determines accuracy conditions and need not be truth-evaluable.

Schmidt does not so much argue for the claim that perceptual content is scenario content as assert that “scenario contents provide the best account for experiential content” (p. 15). So I would have liked a bit more discussion of other candidates. Indeed, one would have welcomed a more overt defense of the idea that perceptual experiences are representational in the first place. Some considerations in favor of representationalism are implied by Schmidt's arguments that perceptual content is nonconceptual, but I would have preferred more explicit arguments for the view. After all, according to so-called naïve realism, perceptual experience is not representational (or, sometimes