

PHIL 971–Kantian Conceptualism

Handout 1

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The process of conceptualization or judgement takes the subject from his being in one kind of informational state (with a content of a certain kind, namely, non-conceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content).

Varieties of Reference, 227

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1 Content

1.1 What is Content?

Philosophers often speak of the 'content of a mental state'. We need to distinguish between two senses of the 'content' of a mental state:¹

1. 'Content' as local containment—e.g. water contained in a bucket
 - Mental 'content' as that which is 'in' the mind/brain
2. 'Content' as information conveyed—e.g. the content of a newspaper article
 - Mental 'content' as the information conveyed in virtue of being in a particular kind of mental state (or undergoing a particular kind of mental event)
 - 'Content' in this second sense typically possesses two characteristics:
 - i. Content is abstract
 - ii. Content is or determines a correctness condition

¹ When one speaks of the contents of a bucket, one is talking about what is spatially inside the bucket. An analogous use of "the contents of perception" would pick out what is 'in the mind' when one has a perceptual experience. In contrast, when one speaks of the contents of a newspaper, one is talking about what information the newspaper stories convey. Most contemporary uses of "the contents of perception" take such contents to be analogous to the contents of a newspaper story, rather than the contents of a bucket. This notion of content can straightforwardly accommodate the idea that there is such a thing as the 'testimony of the senses'. (Siegel (2005)).

1.2 Why Content?

Psychological explanation is often made in terms which appeal to propositional attitudes.

- Beliefs, desires, etc. have **content**—i.e. representational states which possess correctness conditions (truth/falsity; accuracy/inaccuracy)
 - 'John believes **that the moon is made of green cheese**'
 - 'Sally desires **that she have a gin and tonic**'
- Content, and the attitudes associated with it, is used for a variety of explanatory purposes:

- predict and explain the behavior of ourselves and others
- the primary bearers of truth-value
- sharable objects of intentional states

1.3 Two Kinds of Content

1. Structured propositions
 - 'Russellian' propositions: ordered pairs of objects and properties/universals
 - 'Fregean' propositions: structured combinations of concepts ('modes of presentation')
2. 'Unstructured' sets of possible worlds (or functions from worlds to truth values)

1.4 An Argument for Structured Propositions

Why think that propositions have structure?

1. Fineness of grain
 - Analytic truths are true in all possible worlds.
 - Possible world semantics has difficulty distinguishing *prima facie* distinct propositions that are analytic truths.
 - 'all green things are green' and 'all green things are colored' would express the same proposition
2. 'Directly referential' rigid designation (see King (1997) for discussion)

1.5 An Argument for 'Fregean' Propositions

There is an apparent difference in cognitive value for different but co-referring thoughts or sentences, e.g.:

- 'Mark Twain is Mark Twain'
- 'Samuel Clemens is Mark Twain'

Could someone rationally affirm the truth of one of these sentences but not the other?²

- Answering 'Yes' requires explaining how they are different. Appeal to differing concepts used to think of or express the same referent is one possible explanation.
- Answering 'No' requires explaining the appearance of rationality (in the proper conditions) in the failure to assent to both sentences

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² there can be cases in which a rational subject who understands [two co-referring] terms can, say, believe the thought she understands as expressed by one sentence from such a pair while disbelieving the thought she understands as expressed by the other. To suppose that she both believes and disbelieves the same thing would bring her rationality into question, though *ex hypothesi* her combination of attitudes is consistent with her being rational. We can smoothly maintain the hypothesis of rationality if it is not the same thing that she believes and disbelieves. Her understanding of the two sentences associates them with different thoughts...That is what a difference in sense (Sinn) is, on the part of subsentential expressions. (A difference in Sinn on the part of whole sentences just is a difference in thoughts expressed.) Thoughts about the same object can differ in how the object figures in them, how it is presented by singular terms that refer to it in expressions of the thoughts. (McDowell 2005, 47)

2 What is a Concept?

Assume the existence of structured 'Fregean' propositions—what are the components of such propositions?

2.1 The Standard Model

The standard model of the components of a structured Fregean proposition is one according to which the components are understood as concepts. Concepts are:

1. Recombinable: the concepts that figure in a given set of thoughts may be recombined to form new thoughts
 - From **grass is green** and **snow is white** one can generate the thoughts that **grass is white** and **snow is green**
2. Determinative of the semantic structure and value of the proposition of which they are part
 - Compositionality: the meaning of a complex thought is determined by the meanings of its constituent parts plus rules of combination
3. Systematically related
 - Thoughts of the form $Fa, Gb; aRb$ may be entertained by a subject just in case she can entertain thoughts like $Fb, Ga; bRa$
4. Occur always as part of a propositional whole—i.e. a truth evaluable proposition
 - One entertains or grasps a concept only via a grasp of a proposition or propositions of which that concept is a part
5. Abstract
 - neither propositions nor their conceptual components are spatially or temporally located
6. Public
 - propositions and their conceptual components are inter and intra-subjectively available

2.2 Concepts and Levels of Explanation

Concepts, though abstract, are psychologically relevant. At what level are they relevant?³

- If John believes that the sky is blue he must possess the concepts <sky> and <is blue>. Possibly he comes to believe this on an occasion on which he sees that the sky is blue.

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³ The dominant paradigm within cognitive science involves postulating representational states at the subpersonal or subdoxastic levels. Examples are the representational states implicated in tacit knowledge of the rules of syntax...That is, the language-user is ascribed knowledge of rules formulated in terms of concepts that he does not possess. A similar point holds for the representational states postulated in computational theories of vision...The contents of such states are formulated in terms of concepts (such as the concept of a zero-crossing) that are clearly not possessed by the average perceiver. (Bermúdez 2012, 22-3)

- Question: Do explanations of John's seeing that the sky is blue which appeal to cognitive processes in his visual system also require appeal to concepts like <sky> and <is blue>?
 - * Personal level explanations: explanations that appeal to capacities, states, and abilities of whole cognitive subjects
 - * Sub-personal explanations: explanations that appeal to representations attributed to cognitive systems or subsystems, which often are not consciously accessible or inferentially integrated with the representational states and capacities of the whole cognitive subject.

3 What is (Non)Conceptualism?

3.1 State (Non)Conceptualism

- Conceptual/Non-conceptual distinction drawn in terms of the relation(s) which a subject has to her mental states^{4,5}

3.2 Content (Non)Conceptualism

- Conceptual/Non-conceptual distinction drawn in terms of properties of the **content** of a mental state^{6,7}

4 Problems

4.1 Problems with State Non-conceptualism

State non-conceptualist definitions tend to exhibit a common defect of the following form⁸

State M with content p has non-conceptual content iff S can be in M even though S does not possess the concepts in p.

The defect is that the variable 'S' has free occurrences to the right of the 'iff' but no occurrences at all on the left. So we have three options:

- remove the variable 'S' on the right
- add a corresponding variable 'S' on the left
- do neither (i) nor (ii) and instead quantify over the variable 'S' on the right

Instances of (i) include both Speaks⁹ and Byrne¹⁰

4.2 Problems with Content Non-conceptualism

- Both Speaks and Byrne define non-conceptual content with respect to what it isn't—viz. something that can be the content of a belief.

⁴ Those who hold that there is non-conceptual content maintain that there are mental states which represent the world, even though their subject lacks the concepts that would enable her to specify that content. (Gendler and Hawthorne 2006, 14).

⁵ The central idea behind the theory of nonconceptual mental content is that some mental states can represent the world even though the bearer of those mental states need not possess the concepts required to specify their content. (Bermúdez 2008).

⁶ For a state to be content-nonconceptual, on the other hand, the content of the state must be of a particular type, namely a nonconceptual type. Conversely, for a state to be content-conceptual is for the content of the state to have concepts as constituents (Bermúdez 2011).

⁷ The content of a state is nonconceptual if "an individual does not or cannot exercise the concepts involved in its articulation." (Gunther 2003, 14).

⁸ All of them purport to define nonconceptuality as a property of contents, yet in their definientia, they seem to formulate what is more properly (at least in the first instance) a feature of a state of a subject or of a subject's relation to a content. (Van Cleve 2012, 412).

⁹ A mental state has absolutely nonconceptual content iff that mental state has a different kind of content than do beliefs, thoughts, and so on. (2005, 360).

¹⁰ Non-conceptual content is not conceptual content, where the latter is characterized either as belief content, or as content with concepts in the Fregean sense as constituents. (2005, 233).

- But different theorists understand the content of belief in different ways (e.g. Russellian and Stalnakerian views of content).
- So if one has a theory of **belief** content in which concepts do not figure and a theory of **perceptual** content in which they do figure, then one comes out as holding both that perceptual content is non-conceptual and that it is conceptual. And that is an obviously bad result. We want a definition of non-conceptual content that does not appeal to the content of belief.

5 **Phenomenal and Representational Non-conceptual Content**

The conceptual/nonconceptual distinction often tracks two distinct issues:

- the representational vs. the non-representational
- the sensory vs. the non-sensory

The early modern tradition tends to conflate these distinctions so that sensory states (or contents) are ipso facto considered non-representational and non-sensory states (or contents) are ipso facto representational.

In particular, we want to track two distinct possibilities:

- phenomenal intentionality/representation
 - this may or may not be propositional/conceptual
- non-propositional intentionality/representation
 - this may or may not be/have phenomenal character

6 **Further Reading**

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