A New Argument for
Nonconceptual Content

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This paper provides a novel argument against conceptualism, the claim that the content of human experience, including perceptual experience, is entirely conceptual. Conceptualism entails that the content of experience is limited by the concepts that we possess and deploy. I present an argument to show that such a view is exceedingly costly—if the nature of our experience is entirely conceptual, then we cannot account for concept learning: all perceptual concepts must be innate. The version of nativism that results is incompatible with naturalistic accounts of concept learning. This cost can be avoided, and concept learning accounted for if nonconceptual content of experience is admitted.

The debate about nonconceptual content is a debate about what theoretical entities need to be invoked in order to explain experience and other mental states. Conceptualism, the thesis that the representational content of our experience is entirely conceptual, is famously championed by John McDowell, Wilfrid Sellars, and more recently, Bill Brewer. Conceptualists invoke the same entities, concepts, for explaining both thought and perception. Those who oppose conceptualism, nonconceptualists such as Christopher Peacocke, Sean Kelly, Richard Heck, and José Bermúdez, disagree that perceiving is to be explained in terms of concepts, and argue instead that our perceptual experience is at least partly nonconceptual.

The following scenario may help clarify the nature of the debate: Suppose you attend your first wine-tasting with a friend who is an oenophile, and you both have the good fortune to taste a 1982 Château Pélus. Your friend possesses sophisticated wine-concepts that you lack. You taste something that you describe as a fantastic, complex red wine, clearly the best you have ever had the pleasure to experience. Your friend, equally enthusiastic, tastes something he describes as a full-bodied, jammy Bordeaux with moderate glycerin content, noticeable terroire, strong tannins, with definite cassis up front and a hint of
butterscotch at the finish. Do your actual taste experiences of the wine differ greatly, or merely the judgments you make about your respective, highly similar perceptual experiences? The conceptualist will say that your taste experiences themselves must be different, for the content of your experience is limited by the concepts you yourself possess; the nonconceptualist will allow that your taste experiences can be exactly the same, since you can have experiences with content that outstrips your conceptual repertoire.¹

Conceptualists are motivated by epistemological worries, such as whether and how our perceptual experience grounds and justifies our beliefs (in short, they think it cannot do so unless the content of such experience is in some strong sense “fully conceptual”). Consequently, the epistemological issues associated with the debate about nonconceptual content—how perception allows us to enter into ‘the space of reasons’—have received considerable attention.² But concepts figure in our mental lives in other significant ways that have received rather less attention in this literature than they deserve. One which will be the focus of the present essay is this: we learn concepts, often and perhaps typically on the basis of perceptual experience. In this vein, I offer a novel argument for why we have to posit nonconceptual content of experience: such content is a crucial input for concept learning.³ The upshot of my argument is this: Conceptualism entails concept nativism. That concepts are innate, not learned, is conceptualism’s price, and it is too high a price to pay. Thus, the debate about nonconceptual content also matters because conceptualism leads to a mistaken view about an extremely important psychological phenomenon, concept learning.

In part 1 of this paper I clarify some important terms and situate my argument in the larger debate about nonconceptual content. In part 2, I present the learning argument. Part 3 clarifies how this argument fits in to the literature on concept learning and nativism, and discusses the degree of commitment to nativism that follows from

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¹ This example is meant to jog the intuitions. Some people think it likely that experiences are shaped or modulated by the concepts or the expertise one possesses, so that it may seem right to say that the experiences differ in the case of the novice and the oenophile. However, the claim being made is a modal claim—that the novice couldn’t possibly have the same taste experience as the expert. I, for one, find it puzzling how one could learn to discriminate subtle differences of the vine if one couldn’t first perceive them.

² See Sellars (1956) and McDowell (1994).

³ The suggestion that nonconceptual content may be involved in acquiring concepts appears in the writings of several philosophers (Bermúdez, 1994; Heck, 2000; Kelly, 2001, Peacocke, 2001) but an argument to that effect has not, to my knowledge, been developed. Here I do just that.
conceptualism paired with various theories of concepts. In part 4 I respond to some possible objections to the learning argument, and in the concluding section I briefly explore some implications of the argument.

Part 1: Concepts, Nonconceptual Content and Experience

Thought and perceptual experience represent the world as being a certain way. The content of a thought, or the content of an experience, is the way that thought or experience represents the world as being. That is, for the content of experience to be entirely conceptual, all content that enters the awareness of the thinker does so entirely by means of the deployment of conceptual representations, or concepts. For it to be nonconceptual means that this is not the case. A thinker deploys a concept when she uses or exercises it, and possesses a concept if she has that concept available for deployment. Thinkers may possess concepts they never deploy, but they cannot deploy a concept they do not possess.

But what is a concept? There is widespread agreement that concepts determine or refer to categories of objects: the concept dog, for example, refers to or picks out dogs. Beyond this, however, there is little agreement about what concepts are. Evans (1982) and Peacocke (1992), for instance, take concepts to be abstract objects, like meanings or senses. Others take concepts to be mental tokens, like words in the head, or representations of prototypical features (see Fodor, 1998a; Prinz, 2002). According to all these views, however, there are features of our psychological states in virtue of which we do, or do not, possess certain concepts. Thus, the debate about nonconceptual content can be cast in terms of the psychological resources a thinker must possess and deploy in order to represent the world as being a certain way.

The debate about nonconceptual content is premised upon the notion that both conceptual content and nonconceptual content are coherent notions; the question at issue is whether the content of

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4 On some views, deploying a concept involves activating a token of that conceptual type, or 'tokening' it.
5 ‘Object’ here is to be construed broadly, to include properties and other abstract entities.
6 As is customary, concepts are indicated with capitalization.
7 For ease of exposition, I assume that concepts are mental tokens, but the argument could be altered to accommodate other metaphysical views about concepts.
human experience is entirely conceptual, or at least partly nonconceptual.

Gareth Evans (1982), who introduced the notion of nonconceptual content, mentions a number of motivations for postulating a form of content distinct from the conceptual: Nonconceptual content captures basic informational similarities between our internal states and those of other non-concept-applying creatures; our perceptual discriminatory abilities outstrip the representational resources of our conceptual repertoire; our experience is more richly textured than any verbal (conceptual) description of it could capture; and finally, the content of our perceptual experiences provides the basis for the content of our judgments. Evans’ insights provide reasons to believe that there is nonconceptual content of human experience, that is, that there are representational aspects of human experience that require neither the exercise nor possession of the concepts which might be needed to adequately characterize that experience. In what follows, I offer a new argument for the existence of nonconceptual content of human experience: Nonconceptual content of experience must be invoked to account for concept learning. To deny this one must embrace concept nativism.

**Part 2. The Argument from Concept Learning**

All parties to the debate about nonconceptual content agree that nonconceptual content, if such there is, is minimally a feature or component of our perceptual experience. Conceptualists like Brewer, for instance, maintain that our perceptual experiences are wholly conceptual: “Perceptual experiences therefore have representational contents which are characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself must possess...” (Brewer, 1999, p 203). And so it is indeed to perception that I look in order to formulate my argument for nonconceptual content.

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8 Some, like Robert Stalnaker, argue that content is wholly nonconceptual, but he takes the question to regard how content is individuated, and not the nature of the mental representations doing the representing.

9 The argument offered here is novel, but it is not wholly unforeseen. Peacocke (2001) suggests in passing that nonconceptual content could provide the requisite content for construction of concepts, although his comment is more of an appeal to intuition than an argument. Heck (2000) approaches my point more closely, although he concentrates on the need for nonconceptual content in the formation of demonstrative concepts, rather than in concept learning more generally.
How does a thinker come to have lexical concepts with perceptual content, such as red? Unless one takes a rationalist view according to which such concepts are innate, they must be learned. The argument begins with an assumption of conceptualism, and then examines whether there is an account of concept learning that is compatible with conceptualism’s claims. The upshot is that conceptualism entails that perceptual concepts cannot be learned.

I focus here on cases of perceptual concept learning, and specifically on concepts learned initially from visual experience. My arguments can extend, I think rather unproblematically, to other cases of conceptual learning from perceptual experience, such as learning to associate bird calls with bird species, or particular tastes with categories. Although the argument is general, and is applicable to all lexical concepts that involve a perceptual or recognitional component, for ease of exposition it is framed with reference to an example concept, the concept red.

I first lay out the learning argument, and then discuss each step in more detail:

(1) The content of experience is entirely conceptual.

(2) If the concept red is learned, it is learned on the basis of visual experiences with content representing a red object (R experiences).

(3) Having R experiences is due to the thinker being in a conceptual representational state.

(4) Having R experiences due to being in a conceptual state either involves deployment of the concept red or it involves the deployment of other concepts.

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10 I restrict the scope of the argument to learning lexical concepts. Lexical concepts are, roughly, concepts corresponding to single words in a language, like Dog, Oryx, Telephone, and so on. The content of phrasal concepts, like Brown Cow, is generally thought to be composed from the contents of the lexical concepts Brown and Cow. If this is so, we can account for complex or phrasal concepts by appeal to compositionality, and to lexical concepts the thinker possesses. (If not, then the argument will apply to phrasal concepts as well).

11 Learning may be especially important if we are concerned with how perception is to justify our beliefs about the world, to ground them in empirical reality. On some epistemological views if we were just born with all concepts innately specified, we would be hard-pressed to give an account of why the tokening of one such concept, our concept red, would justify us in believing that the things in the world which led us to token it actually were red. Unless the conceptualist is a reliabilist, his epistemological scruples should move him to accept that perceptual concepts are learned.
(5) If having R experiences involves the concept *red*, then the subject already possesses the concept *red*, and so there is no tenable explanation available as to how that experience is responsible for the acquisition of such a concept.

(6) If having R experiences doesn’t involve the concept *red*, then learning the concept *red* on the basis of R experiences requires that, in the process of its acquisition, the content of the concept is compositionally built up from other concepts the thinker possesses.

(7) The concept *red* is not compositionally built up from other concepts.

(8) The concept *red* is not learned.

Conceptualists will accept step 1 of the argument, which is just a statement of the conceptualist thesis. Step 2 elucidates what it means for a concept to be learned. For a concept to be learned, it must be learned on the basis of experience. What does this amount to? A concept is learned on the basis of experience only if its acquisition is causally dependent upon experiential presentation of objects, features, relations, etc., to which the concept applies. So learning on the basis of experience involves being confronted in experience, as a result of perceptual causal contact, with an exemplar of the concept to be learned. Step 2 articulates this commonplace view about learning with respect to a particular concept, the concept *red*: Learning *red* involves visual experiential presentation of something red. As step 2 suggests, having contentful experience involves more than just brute-causal processes; it involves awareness of representational content. That is, the content of experience is available to the thinker at the person-level.12

Let us call the experiences engendered by visual experiential presentation of red objects ‘R experiences.’ (2) should be uncontroversial: it is neutral as to whether the content of experience is conceptual or non-conceptual; it does not beg the question against the conceptualist.

Step 3 follows from (1): conceptualism entails that the content of R experiences be due to the thinker being in a conceptual mental state, where the conceptual mental state involves the exercise of relevant

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12 By ‘person-level’ I mean at a level available to the subject, such that it can enter awareness, etc. This contrasts with content at subpersonal levels, which is content which cannot be accessed by the subject. Propositional thought, for instance, occurs at the person-level, whereas retinal representations of the visual environment do not.
concepts. Thus, 1-3 show that learning a concept from experience involves the awareness of representational content, and that, given conceptualism, this awareness involves the deployment of mental representations that are conceptual.

According to (4), there are two ways the redness of experience can be represented conceptually: by means of the concept red, or by means of other concepts. Step 5 rules out the possibility of red being deployed in representing redness as an account of how red is learned, for certainly such an account is circular. One may think that the conceptualist may deny 5 because he holds that in having an experience of redness one comes to have the concept red: having the experience is acquiring the concept. However, there is no argument available as to why the mere fact that one has an experience with a certain content is an acceptable account of concept acquisition. To address this, one would either have to deny that there is any scientifically viable explanation of how acquisition occurs, appealing instead to miracles or magic, or one would have to invoke demonstrative concepts (concepts typically denoted by phrases such as “that shade”). As I shall briefly argue in Section 4, demonstrative concepts do not free the conceptualist from the need for nonconceptual content of experience: the process of demonstrative concept formation itself requires explanation, and such an explanation depends upon the thinker having experiences with nonconceptual content. Thus, step 5 indicates that learning red cannot be accounted for by appeal to perceptual experience whose content requires the deployment of red.

Steps 6-7 advert to the implausibility that one can learn a concept such as red purely in virtue of one’s possession of other concepts. The idea is this: redness could be represented conceptually without deploying red if the content of red experiences could be constructed compositionally from other concepts that the thinker possessed. For instance, the content of bachelor might be represented by a thinker who lacked that concept if she could put together the concepts male and unmarried, which she possessed. However, as (7) claims, there are some concepts, perceptual ones among them, for which giving a compositional story seems impossible. Compositionality presupposes a conceptual base. It should be noted that this does not mean that other concepts cannot play a role in the thinker coming to possess red. It is possible, for instance, that the concept color will play some role in an account of the acquisition of red, but even so, the contribution of that concept will have to be supplemented with other content—namely the visual qualitative content of red, or ‘redness’—in order to permit the association of the mental symbol ‘red’ with the appropriate perceptual content red as opposed to that of some other color.
Thus, from 4-7, we can conclude that, at least for the purposes of learning a new concept, the content of experiences of red objects cannot be represented by a purely conceptual state. If we are to maintain conceptualism, as (1) ensures, we reach our conclusion (8), that the concept *red* is not learned. This argument highlights the nativist dilemma for the particular concept used to illustrate it. As long as (7) is true for the concept chosen, the argument succeeds in showing that, given conceptualism, that concept must be innate. If the reader doubts that (7) is true for *red*, let him or her substitute a concept he or she regards as a noncompositional or simple concept in place of ‘*red*’ in the argument. Clearly, not all concepts can be compositionally constructed because compositional concepts must be constructed out of more simple ones, so some concepts must be basic. The argument then shows that those concepts are innate. The argument can be extended straightforwardly: it can be run individually for all perceptual lexical concepts, leading to a widespread nativism. Thus, if the “content of a perceptual experience is already conceptual” (McDowell, 1994 p.48), as the conceptualist maintains, then learning perceptually-based concepts is not possible; so nativism follows.

This argument can be further understood to suggest that concept learning, if it occurs, requires nonconceptual content. Clearly, one way we might avoid the nativist conclusion is to deny conceptualism (i.e. deny step 1). If we allow that the content of experiences of red objects can be nonconceptual, i.e. that there can be awareness of content that need not involve the deployment of concepts such as *red*, we are provided with contentful elements of experience which arguably can play a role in concept learning, while not requiring us to assume the prior existence of the concept whose acquisition we are trying to explain. I should emphasize here that what it is to have R experiences that do not involve the concept *red* is *not* to be aware that one is having experiences of red objects, but rather is to be aware of redness.

A skeptic might protest that concept learning is a problem for everyone, conceptualists and nonconceptualists alike. Not so. While a fully detailed account of concept-learning will doubtless require much more philosophical and empirical work, a sketch of a concept-learning story that is consistent with much of the experimental work in developmental psychology has already been provided by Margolis (1998). The broad outlines of his account may be correct for the acquisition of natural kind concepts. While I will not present his theory here, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that he postulates that relevant perceptual information is put in association with a dummy concept, or a mental symbol lacking semantic value, in the construction of a new concept. My claim is that this association requires that the concept learner be
aware of the perceptual content of experience in order to do this. While Margolis’ discussion doesn’t explicitly engage with issues of conceptual vs. nonconceptual content, and he neither affirms nor denies that this perceptual information is available to the thinker in nonconceptual form, I suggest that the only way in which such a story can be understood as a story of concept learning is if the perceptual information is taken to be represented by nonconceptual states. Thus, an alternative way of understanding the argument from learning is that if one is to maintain a naturalistic view of psychological capacities, nonconceptual representations must play a role in our experience. Furthermore, content represented nonconceptually is not merely an idle bystander in our cognitive economy. On the contrary, it plays a critical role in concept learning.

My argument confronts the conceptualist with the costs of his position: to be a conceptualist he must embrace concept nativism. Conceptualists appear unaware of this cost. Both McDowell and Brewer, for instance, seem to assume that concepts are learned. McDowell thinks infants are “mere animals, distinctive only in their potential” (McDowell, 1994 p.123), that are transformed through learning language into conceptual beings: social interaction plays an important role in the creation of a conceptual creature. This suggests that he takes concepts not to be innate. Furthermore, he holds that concepts are refashionable on the basis of rational reflection, so they must not be fully formed static entities available to the thinker from the start. Brewer likewise denies that infant cognition is conceptual:

Since it must be acknowledged on all sides of this dispute that creatures who are incapable of conceptual thought do develop into those who are capable of such thought—for otherwise infant perception could simply be characterized fully conceptually from the start—there must be some story to be told about what is involved in this transition... It does not follow that animal and infant perception, on the one hand, and mature human perception, on the other, must each share a common core of nonconceptual experiential content. (Brewer, 1999 pp.177-178).

Although denying that infant experience is conceptual is not equivalent to affirming that concepts are learned, Brewer does appear to think concepts are learned. He recognizes the gravity of the puzzle that the transition from nonconceptual infant to conceptual adult poses for the conceptualist, but, he argues, in the absence of a worked-out concept-learning story, accounting for concept learning is not a pressing problem with which the conceptualist must deal. Perhaps Margolis’ story, coupled with the learning argument would be sufficient to convince
him that it is time for the conceptualist to seriously consider the nativist implications of his position.

**Part 3. Concept Nativism**

I have argued that maintaining conceptualism requires one to embrace nativism. Placing nativism and the learning argument in context will help illuminate the significance of the position. First I explore the space of possibilities that a theorist might take on concept attainment, I then discuss the relation of the learning argument to Fodor’s argument for nativism, and finally I briefly examine whether any plausible version of nativism is compatible with conceptualism, and conclude that conceptualists are committed to an implausible version of nativism.

*Varieties of Concept Attainment*

It is uncontroversial that normal adult humans can exercise a vast array of concepts, that as infants they could not. Let us call any process that accounts for this difference an attainment process. The ability to use concepts is attained over time. But what does this amount to? Nativists hold that concept attainment does not depend upon empirical content; non-nativists recognize the importance of empirical content for concept attainment.

A nativist about concepts holds that the representational structures that are concepts are genetically endowed, either present from birth, or emerging as a result of normal maturational processes without the need for particular external input or effort on the part of the thinker. We can think of innate concepts as concepts whose structure is fully formed independent of experience.¹³ Nativism is consistent with both a picture in which innate concepts are always available at the person-level (i.e. available for use), and one in which innate concepts are not available to the agent at one time, but are made available at some later time as a brute-causal effect of a particular event or experience. That is, an innate concept, fully formed, could be latent or masked, requiring some event to trigger it. Fodor, for example, reconciled his

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¹³ ‘Concept nativism’ is a term oft used but rarely rigorously explicated. However, in her book *What's Within*, Cowie (1999) explores the commitments of various forms of nativism, and suggests that it is most charitably understood as an expression of pessimism for the prospects of understanding concept acquisition, rather than as a psychological claim about the origin of concepts. While I am sympathetic to her analysis, I think that some nativists are pushed to view their position as a claim about concept origin (see Fodor, 1980; Fodor, 2001), and that the pessimism exhibited by nativists is partly a result of taking insufficient notice of the potential power of nonconceptual representations and a too-rigid understanding of learning.
commitment to concept nativism with the empirical facts about conceptionsal development by claiming that innate concepts are triggered by relevant experiences. It should be noted that triggering is not an alternative to nativism: it is a way of reconciling nativism with observable facts about cognitive development.

What alternatives to nativism are there? The representational structures in mind that constitute or enable the possession of concepts must be constructed in a manner dependent upon external input. Let us call this process of construction acquisition. We can distinguish two forms of acquisition. First, acquisition could be a brute causal process dependent upon external input that leads to changes at some physiological level, but does not require any attention or cognitive effort or awareness at the person-level for it to occur. Classical conditioning is an example of the former sort of acquisition; it occurs in the lowly sea slug as well as in mammals, and can proceed in the absence of consciousness. A brute-causal acquisition story, one which occurs purely at the sub-personal level, is not one that will explain how we come to have concepts, representations that are available to us at the person level; nor is it one that will allow us to justify our use of concepts to make reference to the external world. Justification does not stem from the causal fact that we are moved to token a concept, but rather from the existence of an appropriate relation between the content of experience and the content of a concept.

The second type of acquisition, for which I reserve the term learning, is a person-level phenomenon. When it comes to acquisition of concepts, it is this form of acquisition which best respects data from psychology, as well as philosophical and biological constraints. Learning intimately involves the person-level: it requires effort and attention; it is a goal-driven, cognitive activity. The philosophical intuition is that in concept learning, concepts are actively constructed by thinkers, they do not just occur to them. They are constructed not ex nihilo, but on the basis of experience. The content of experience plays a role in fixing the content of the concepts a thinker acquires. We might characterize this view of learning with the slogan “learning is a cognitive achievement.” This, I maintain, is the only viable way to account for concept attainment, for it is the only one fit to explain how concepts can be person-level constructs, available for deployment in thought. If learning is not a person-level phenomenon, then, it seems, there is no account of how concepts become available at the person-level short of an appeal to miracles.

In sum, there appear to be two options which may account for concept attainment. One is nativism, and the other learning. After I briefly explore the relation of my argument to Fodor’s famous argument for...
concept nativism, I argue that the nativist options available to the conceptualist are ones that don’t sit well with current scientific understanding.

_Fodor’s Nativism_

The nativist debate has a venerable history in philosophy, in the guise of the debate about innate ideas (Cowie, 1999; Stich, 1975). In the contemporary literature, so steeped in the juices of cognitive science, that ancient debate has been transformed into one about innate concepts. Radical concept nativism came to seem a respectable, if problematic, position when Jerry Fodor openly espoused it in response to his own famous argument that there is no known mechanism that enables a system to develop representational resources more powerful than those it begins with (Fodor, 1980; 1981). Given a Fodorian view of the mind, nativism might seem an inescapable conclusion; I think it is not if one abandons commitment to overly rigid models of learning and purely conceptual content.

Fodor’s argument that concepts cannot be learned rested heavily on his identification of learning with hypothesis-generation-and-testing, as well as on an assumption that all mental representation is representation in a language of thought. I believe these commitments represent flaws in his argument for nativism.

We learn many things. We learn what elephants are, we learn to ride bikes, we learn to recognize new people and learn their names, we learn higher math, we learn who to trust, and how to cook a turkey just right. Learning none of these things obviously involves hypothesis-generation-and-testing, and results from psychology and neuroscience suggest that most learning is not accurately described by the hypothesis-generation-and-testing model. A standard objection to Fodor, and one that is not satisfactorily countered, is that learning encompasses a broader range of phenomena than he allows. However, while I too take Fodor’s view of learning to be too restrictive, I respect his intuition that concept learning is a person-level phenomenon. Given a high theory of concepts (See discussion of high and low theories on pp. 648–50.), concept learning cannot be explained merely by the acquisition of a behavioral disposition, as Pavlovian conditioning might be viewed. To learn a concept is a cognitive achievement, one which influences thought at the person-level. It is a temporally extended process, at the start of which the thinker lacks possession of a concept, and after which the thinker possesses that concept, in that the thinker then has the capacity to employ that concept in thought (see, for instance, Carey, 1991). As I have said before, to view concept learning as just a
brute-causal event with person-level sequelae would be to fail to explain concept acquisition—the transition from brute-causation to subjective access to content would remain a mystery.

The other element that inexorably led Fodor to his conclusion that concepts must be innate was his commitment to a language of thought. For Fodor, concepts just are words in the language of thought, and they exhaust the intentional resources of the representational system. In other words, Fodor failed to recognize the possibility that nonconceptual representations could enter experience, and play a role in the learning process. Although some theorists who share Fodor’s theory of concepts (called ‘conceptual atomism’) have attempted to demonstrate that such a theory is compatible with concept learning (Margolis, 1998), I argue below that this is only so if the theory of concepts admits of nonconceptual representations in experience. Thus, I think Fodor’s commitment to a language of thought implicitly ruled out consideration of nonconceptual content. Fodor’s conclusion that all concepts are innate is mistaken; a broader view of learning, and openness to nonconceptual content make a learning account possible (It is worth noting that in recent years even Fodor has begun to deny radical concept nativism.)

In this section I have tried to relate my argument for nativism to Fodor’s. In essence, one can view my argument as a more general instance of Fodor’s. The differences are that the model of learning I embrace need not be as restrictive as hypothesis-generation and testing, though it is also learning at the person-level. Secondly, Fodor’s argument led him to embrace radical nativism, despite its implausibility, because he could see no way to avoid such a conclusion. However, I think he could see no alternative, in part, because his theory of a language of thought implicitly committed him to conceptualism. I suggest instead that one take the argument from learning as a reductio of conceptualism; by admitting nonconceptual content of experience one can reinstate the possibility of concept learning.

**What Degree Nativism?**

There are a number of reasons to reject radical nativism. Here I will mention only one: there is just no scientifically plausible story one can give that can account for the range, number, and apparent unboundedness of concepts that we do or could possess. We are just animals, an evolutionarily recent departure from our nonlinguistic relatives; ontogenetically, we begin as single cells containing an informationally finite genetic blueprint. This being so, we ought to be able to offer a naturalistic account of where at least most of our concepts come from; that a concept such as *umbrella* is innate is not a viable option.
I do not wish to argue that any degree of nativism is sufficiently troubling to warrant the abandonment of conceptualism; some concepts may well be innate, and ultimately the viability of theories in which some concepts are innate is an empirical issue. My main aim so far has been to show that conceptualism entails nativism. It remains to be seen whether the degree of nativism entailed by conceptualism is pernicious enough to warrant a rejection of conceptualism. Here I will briefly sketch the nativist implications for some prominent theories of concepts on offer today. I suggest that the theories that are available to the conceptualist commit him to an unacceptable form of nativism, whereas the ones that involve a limited nativism are not open to conceptualists.

Core concept nativism: For context, I begin with a theory whose commitments to nativism are relatively constrained, called ‘core concept nativism’. A core concept theory is espoused by a number of developmental psychologists (Carey, 1991; Leslie, 1994; Spelke & Newport, 1998) as being most consistent with the data from developmental psychology. The general idea of core concept nativism is that a handful of fundamental concepts are not learned. The spatiotemporal object concept, small number concepts, and some folk psychological concepts are thought to be core. Reliance on innate core concepts combined with information gleaned from experience is generally thought to account for construction of new concepts. For core concept nativists, then, a few basic concepts are innate, most are learned.

Notably, the core concepts posited are not observational or perceptual concepts; they are more abstract. Information characterizing perceptual concepts is thought to come through experience; thus, concept construction in core concept nativism seems to rely upon the admission of nonconceptual content. Furthermore, to the extent that perceptual information is involved in characterizing complex kind concepts, and to the extent that these are not compositional (see below), one would expect these too to depend upon access to nonconceptual content of experience. Thus, the limited nativism of a core concept nativist theory is not an option available to the conceptualist. It relies upon nonconceptual content to account for the learning of most concepts. In what follows I discuss the nativism implied by two kinds of theories of concepts that are compatible with conceptualism.

Conceptual atomism: Fodor’s conceptual atomism is one of the most thoroughly elaborated theories of concepts in philosophy. Its core principle is that possession of any lexical concept is independent of possession of any another (Fodor, 1990; 1998a). Although Fodor once accepted radical concept nativism (see above), he no longer does

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14 See Prinz (2002) for arguments that almost all concepts have perceptual elements.
(Fodor, 1998a), and some of his followers, realizing that nativism is a pill few will swallow, try to reconcile conceptual atomism with a story for concept learning (Margolis, 1998, discussed briefly above). Without going into detail about conceptual atomism or the learning story meant to support it, I think I can demonstrate that unless the conceptual atomist recognizes nonconceptual content, he will be committed to the most thoroughgoing form of nativism. The version of my argument tailored to conceptual atomism is much the same as the general argument presented earlier. What differs is that, since according to conceptual atomism lexical concepts are not compositionally structured, no lexical concept can be built out of other concepts. Nor can the learning of any lexical concept (logically) depend upon already possessing others. Thus, appeal to a set of basic concepts is an option unavailable to the conceptual atomist. If learning a new concept does require any empirical content, then the content upon which the construction of a new concept depends must be content represented nonconceptually. Thus, for the conceptualist conceptual atomist, one who denies that there is nonconceptual content, all concepts must be innate. Needless to say, such radical nativism is unacceptable.

**Compositional theorist:** The compositional theorist posits a wide array of innate basic concepts, combinations of which suffice to form all other concepts. There is good reason to think that this is not a plausible theory of concepts, since conceptual analysis has failed to yield analyses of many, if any, concepts in terms of more basic ones without remainder. Nonetheless, my argument suggests that if one is to espouse a compositional theory of concepts, one must take as innate all perceptual concepts, as well as other concepts that are intimately linked to perceptual identification. The conceptualist faces an uneasy tension here: the version of nativism the conceptualist compositional theorist is forced to endorse is as strong as the set of basic concepts that turn out to be necessary to form all other concepts; however, the smaller the set of basic concepts, the less plausible the commitment to compositionality becomes. Although this form of nativism is not as radical as that entailed by conceptual atomism, it is still problematic. The fineness of grain of perceptual concepts suggests that the compositional theorist will have to posit an unwieldy number of innate

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15 Although Fodor does not address the issue of nonconceptual representations, I believe that his commitment to a language of thought is implicitly a commitment to conceptualism. His own argument for concept nativism suggests that this is so. The structure of Margolis’ account of concept learning suggests that he recognizes the need for nonconceptual content, and perhaps Fodor would now as well.

16 See Fodor (1998a; 1998b) for a series of arguments against a compositional base for lexical concepts.
concepts; these cannot be construed merely as dispositions to discriminate, but they must rather be symbolic elements of thought (see discussion of low and high theories in the following section). Thus, the compositional theorist will have to posit a large, perhaps infinite, set of basic perceptual concepts as innate.17

As I have argued, the conceptualist, in holding that the content of human experience is entirely conceptual, cannot offer an explanation of how we come to have concepts in the first place: he must take at least some concepts as given, as innate. The degree of nativism to which a conceptualist must be committed varies somewhat with his preferred theory of concepts, but no version of nativism available to the conceptualist sits well with what is known from the natural sciences. Given our phylogenetic and ontogenetic background, the forms of nativism entailed by conceptualism are not plausible accounts of concept provenance. I have suggested that by admitting content of experience that is not conceptual, the nonconceptualist can explain how concepts are constructible; this allows him to account for readily observable phenomena such as how infants, with limited conceptual abilities, mature to master a rich conceptual repertoire. Thus, I see the learning argument as a providing a new reason to embrace nonconceptual content.

**Part 4. Objections and Replies**

A variety of objections to the learning argument may spring to mind. I believe there are adequate responses to all. Objections generally will fall into three categories. One involves disputes about the nature of concepts and the nonconceptual content debate; a second involves the notion of concept learning; and the third proffers a conceptualist reply that is meant to undermine the learning argument.

One potential objection to my position comes from someone who holds, in the terminology of Smith (2002), a ‘low’ theory of concepts. According to a low theory of concepts, what it is to have a concept is merely to have a certain ability or disposition to act differentially with regard to a set of entities (typically, the ability to categorize or discriminate things to which the concept applies). Indeed, according to the low view, any demonstrable natural sensitivity to differences in the world suffices to warrant attribution of a concept to an organism. So on the low view, humans and nematodes both are conceptual creatures, though the range and complexity of their conceptual repertoires differs greatly. According to the low view, those representational states which I argue are nonconceptual are classified as conceptual, and indeed all

17 I note, however, that Fodor (1981) does not see this as a problem, and argues that neither do empiricists.
representational states which have the ability to drive action are conceptual. Thus, the learning argument itself relies upon conceptual content.18

The conceptualists engaged in the debate about nonconceptual content of experience, however, are not low theorists. They hold ‘high’ theories of concepts (Smith, 2002). Concept possession requires much more sophisticated machinery according to the high view. The high view takes concepts to be (or possessing them to involve) mental representations appropriately linked to a range of things or properties in the world, such that tokening of these mental representations underlies a host of related abilities, including the ability to think about those things or properties. For example, while having a concept of x in part explains our ability to categorize x’s and discriminate x’s from other things, it also—and more significantly—explains our ability to think about x’s by deploying the concept x in active thought. Importantly, these mental representations have a symbolic element, and they can be combined in contentful ways.19 Most philosophers and psychologists embrace one or another high theory of concepts.20 Fodor’s (1998) theory of concepts is a good illustration of a high theory: a concept is a word in the language of thought, nomologically linked to things in the world that it is a concept of.

My argument against conceptualism applies only to high theories of concepts.21 Conceptualists adhere to a high theory of concepts, for they typically view conceptual abilities as sophisticated ones, tied to linguistic abilities, and to the capacity for abstract thought.22 Indeed, part of the

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18 I assent to this, but then the nonconceptual content debate becomes truly meaningless—if concepts are construed so broadly there is no conceptual distinction between us and other creatures, no particularly close connection with language, etc. See Toribio (2007).

19 This is related to the view that concepts are intimately related to language, or that there is something language-like about concepts. According to the high view, while humans are clearly conceptual creatures, it remains an open question whether nonhuman animals are as well.

20 According to the most likely interpretations, Evans (1982), Fodor (1998a), McDowell (1994), Peacocke (1992) and Smith (2002) are high theorists, although some, such as McDowell and Peacocke, do not directly address the issue of mental representation.

21 One implication of the debate about nonconceptual content concerns our relation to animals. On low theories of concepts, both humans and animals possess concepts, so there is no danger of thinking that human and animal mental lives differ in kind. The threat of discontinuity between humans and animals only arises given a high theory of concepts, since it is arguable that nonlinguistic animals lack concepts. If animals lack concepts, then human and animal mental lives will differ in kind if animal experience is nonconceptual and human experience is conceptual. Thus, the debate about nonconceptual content has strong implications for the relation of human and animal mentality only given a high theory of concepts.

22 Except Noe, who is a low-theory conceptualist.
interest of the debate stems from the fact that it concerns how we are to understand our place in the natural world, in particular vis-à-vis its other inhabitants: What are the cognitive and mental distances between ourselves and other animals? Conceptualists tend to think that the mental lives of humans and animals differ in kind, whereas nonconceptualists see human and animal mental lives as continuous. The fact that the content of human experience is entirely conceptual, the conceptualist thinks, sets us apart from other species. McDowell (1994, Chapter 3), for instance, emphasizes that he does not mean to deflate ‘conceptual’ when he says that experience is conceptual through-and-through. Conceptual capacities must be able to be exploited in active thinking, and open to rational reflection (McDowell, 1994, p. 47). Thus, since my argument is aimed at high-theory conceptualists, my argument presupposes a high view of concepts.

Another issue that might arise concerns the nature of nonconceptual content. Richard Heck (2000); see also Byrne (2003)) contrasts two potential ways of interpreting talk of nonconceptual content, the ‘content view’ and the ‘state view’. One worry may be that my position on this matter is at odds with the positions of those I wish to address.

The content view claims that nonconceptual content is a type of content different in kind from conceptual content, and the nonconceptual content debate is about which type of content characterizes our experiences. The state view claims that rather than there being two kinds of content, there are two kinds of contentful states, distinguished according to the way their content is represented. According to the state view, a thinker is in a mental state with (what is perhaps misleadingly termed) conceptual content, if, in order to be in a state with that content, the thinker must possess and deploy the concepts required to adequately describe or specify that content. A thinker is in a state with nonconceptual content if he can be in a state with that content without possessing or deploying the concepts which specify that content. Thus, according to the state view, the debate about nonconceptual content

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23 Here ‘animals’ refers to nonhuman animals.

24 Thus, we can distinguish two questions, a) does content come in different kinds? and b) what distinguishes conceptual and nonconceptual states? These questions are prima facie independent, though they may turn out to be interestingly related. This is a matter I won’t further address in this paper. For more, see Speaks (2005) and Toribio (2007).

25 Although we can only describe the content of mental states verbally, in words which express our concepts, it must be remembered that this is a constraint of the theoretician’s attempts to talk about these states, not obviously a constraint on the possession of these states themselves. Given an informational understanding of content, it is possible that contentful states can be present in systems that lack conceptual capacities entirely (see, for instance, Smith 2002, chapter 3).
concerns the proper characterization of the psychological resources required to be in a representational state with a certain content.  

I assume the state view. Underlying my commitment to the state view is the conviction that fundamentally, all content is of a kind: it is all informational. This does not rule out the possibility of further subdividing content according to some criterion. We can define types of content derivatively on types of states, depending on whether or not conceptual mental states are or must be brought to bear in representing that content, and call those types of content conceptual and non-conceptual. It is more perspicuous to elaborate my argument in terms of conceptual or nonconceptual representations or states, than in terms of conceptual and nonconceptual content, if only to avoid implying that I hold the content view.  

There is some dispute as to whether the current debate about nonconceptual content presupposes the content view or the state view. As Heck (2000) has argued, Evans, when he introduced the notion of nonconceptual content, had the content view in mind, but he says little about what nonconceptual content might be. Theoretical commitments since then have been even less clear. Peacocke and McDowell profess to hold the content view, yet for both, the mark of nonconceptual

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26 Even Heck, who professes to adhere to the content view, characterizes the nonconceptualist claim in terms that are suspiciously state-viewish: “So the thesis that perceptual content is nonconceptual, as I understand it, implies the claim, highlighted above, that one can be in perceptual states an adequate specification of whose content would necessarily employ concepts one does not possess.” (Heck, 2000 p. 488).  

27 Most players in the debate about nonconceptual content are not explicit about whether they hold the state or the content view, and many slide between them. It is arguable that Evans, Peacocke and McDowell hold the content view, and Tye, Brewer and Smith hold the state view. For a discussion of these two types of view, see Speaks (2005).  

28 See, for instance, Stalnaker (1998). Stalnaker argues against the coherence of the content view. He holds that all content is nonconceptual, for he thinks that all content, both perceptual and conceptual is possible worlds content (informational content).  

29 Byrne (2003) also recognizes that talk of conceptual and nonconceptual concepts and states is intertranslatable, though he takes the content view to be primary, and defines a nonconceptual state as one that has nonconceptual content.  

30 There are substantive reasons to prefer the state view. If all content is of a kind, i.e. informational, then ways of distinguishing between types of contents will be derivative on ways of distinguishing types of states. There are, at least in principle, clear methodological approaches for investigating the issue of whether or not different psychological resources are required for having states with different contents, whereas I see no corresponding methodological approaches for investigating whether there are different kinds of contents.  

31 Even Evans vacillates between language suggesting the content and state views. When he introduces the term ‘nonconceptual content’ he adds that “nonconceptualized content” may be more apt, which suggests content represented or grasped in one way rather than another, more evocative of the state than the content view.
content is that thinkers can have mental states with a certain content while lacking the conceptual resources required to specify that content. Some of the more recent debate on nonconceptual content also appears to be implicitly aligned with the state view. For instance, in *Perception and Reason*, Brewer defends the conceptualist position by discussing the relations between mental states, and defines conceptual states in terms of concept possession:

A mental state is conceptual iff it has a representational content that is characterizable only in terms of concepts which the subject himself must possess and which is of a form which enables it to serve as a premise or the conclusion of a deductive argument, or of an inference of some other kind (e.g. inductive or abductive). (Brewer, 1999 p. 149, author’s emphasis).

Thus, Brewer seems to hold the state view, (as well as a high theory of concepts), as evidenced by his emphasis on the use of conceptual states in reasoning. Tye too, while professing to hold the content view, employs a state view of nonconceptual content (see Byrne, 2003):

The claim that the contents relevant to phenomenal character must be nonconceptual is to be understood as saying that the general features entering into these contents need not be ones for which their subjects possess matching concepts. (Tye, 1995 p.139, author’s emphasis).

Similar statements implicating the state view are evident in Bermúdez (1994), Heck (2000), and Smith (2002, chapter 3). Thus my framing of the issue in terms of concepts that must be possessed and deployed is squarely situated in the terms of the current debate.

A second group of objections concerns the nature of concept learning. One might object that 1) concept learning is a brute causal phenomenon; 2) concept learning does not require awareness; or 3) that concepts are learned implicitly. I will consider these objections in turn. To object to my argument by maintaining that concept learning is a brute causal phenomenon is to set brute causation against the view of learning which I have proposed. Since I assume that concept learning is a causal phenomenon, we are concerned with what “brute” means here. The only reading under which such an objection contrasts with my picture is one in which “brute” indicates a process not open to awareness, or not available to the subject at the person-level. Thus, objections 1 and 2 are expressions of the same worry, in effect denying Step 2 of my argument, that concepts are learned on the basis of contentful perceptual experience. A psychologically sophisticated objection to that same claim might be that concept learning is a manifestation of implicit
learning, a psychologically described learning phenomenon which occurs in the absence of awareness by the learning subject. Thus, it too is a version of the same worry, but this objection rests upon a misunderstanding of the phenomenon, so I discuss it separately.

Let me begin with an intuitive defense of the commitment to the idea that content must enter awareness in order to account for concept learning. Consider the sort of scenario in which the construction of a new concept would not require the awareness of intentional content. On this view, concept learning would be a causal process unavailable to the cognitive agent. Such a brute causal process requires that the structure of the mental representations develops automatically, either by innately specified means, or via impingement from the environment. Consider an example of such a brute causal process. Imagine, for instance, being hit on the head, and as a consequence of the blow coming to have a new lexical concept. Despite the fact that a new concept is attained, we would not consider this a case of concept learning—it would be more like a case of triggering, a merely causal process that does not exercise the cognitive abilities of the subject. Concept learning, in contrast to triggering, is by definition a cognitive achievement. It is difficult to see what sort of cognitive achievement there could be in a purely causal process that doesn’t involve the subject’s awareness of content. Furthermore, as in the blow to the head case, the way in which the implicit concept becomes explicit, or available to the cognizing subject for use in thought, remains a mystery. So since by

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32 See, for example, Cleeremans, Destrebecqz, & Boyer (1998).
33 Connectionist models might be thought to provide an illustration of the brute causal approach; indeed, some have claimed that training regimes in connectionist networks result in concept learning. So, for example, Churchland (1995, chapter 4), claims that a model network that is trained to discriminate rocks from mines learns rock and mine concepts. Thus, one might argue that connectionism provides proof of possibility that concept construction could take place at a subpersonal or non-conscious level. However, for several reasons neural network models fail to be counterexamples to the learning argument. First, neural networks of the rock/mine variety, if they are models of concept learning at all, fall under the dispositional category of theories of concepts, where having a concept just is evincing an ability to discriminate or categorize. As I stipulated earlier, the learning argument, and the debate about nonconceptual content in general, is one that arises only in the context of high theories of concepts, not low ones. Secondly, such models are biologically very unrealistic, so it is difficult to see how they could apply to issues about human concepts and problems of human learning; network training requires instruction and feedback, implementation of which in a biological system arguably would require awareness of the results of categorizing attempts. Finally, even if such models were admitted, they would serve only to show how subpersonal representations can be constructed, since network models have no correlate of awareness. The step from subpersonal construction of the mental representation to availability in consciousness remains as much a mystery given the connectionist story as it is in the story of concept attainment by a blow to the head.
hypothesis concepts are representations available in thought, and thus at the person-level, the conceptualist would still owe us a plausible story for how the subpersonal representation is made available to the person-level, so that content, heretofore unavailable to the thinker, becomes freely deployable in thought.

Implicit learning, however, appears to be a *bona fide* biological phenomenon. So, the third objection might be: What if concepts are learned implicitly? This objection, however, relies upon a misunderstanding of what implicit learning is. Implicit learning involves the learning of an association between stimuli in such a way that the subject is unaware that she is learning that association. It is not a phenomenon in which the subject is unaware of the stimuli themselves. The debate about nonconceptual content is one that concerns whether perceptual information enters awareness independently of conceptualization. It is possible that concepts are learned implicitly, in that the subject is unaware of associating a mental symbol with what is perceptually represented, but this still requires that the subject be aware of what is perceptually represented. Thus, data from implicit learning do not threaten the argument from concept learning.

What if concept learning involves demonstrative concepts in place of nonconceptual content? This final objection is a difficult one, indeed, and one to which I will only be able to gesture at a response here; I address the objection more fully elsewhere (Roskies, Forthcoming). The worry is, if our perceptions involve perceptual demonstrative concepts, and if awareness of that conceptual demonstrative content is

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34 An example of implicit learning is the following: If a subject hears a seemingly random sequence of tones that has an embedded pattern, under certain conditions he can recognize the pattern in other tone sequences, even without knowing what pattern it is he is picking out. Semantic priming is another example of implicit learning.

35 Some may offer a further objection, namely that Fodor has shown that there are no recognition concepts (not even red) in a paper by that name (Fodor, 1998c; 1998d). This is a red herring. Fodor’s arguments turn on the assumption that the conceptual concepts the learning argument considers are recognition concepts in Fodor’s sense: i.e., that they are stereotypes (or prototypes), and exploit Fodor’s claim that conceptual content must be compositional to account for the systematicity and productivity of thought. His objection does not apply to my argument: perceptual concepts as I have understood them are not necessarily stereotypes; what is necessary is that the concept be learned in response to some perceptual experience. Secondly, Fodor’s argument applies to concepts *constituted* by perceptual criteria; the learning argument makes no metaphysical claim about what constitutes perceptual concepts, only a claim about how they are learned. The criteria of application for red, for instance, may be “to all and only red things”, which is not a perceptual criterion at all, despite the fact that red must be learned through experience with red things. All that my argument is committed to is the obvious claim that if perceptual concepts are learned, they are learned on the basis of experience.
what is used in constructing a nondemonstrative concept, perhaps we can do away with the need for nonconceptual content of experience to account for concept learning. This is the objection McDowell and Brewer would probably lean on, and if it succeeds, the dilemma posed by my learning argument would be a false one: one would not need to choose between nativism and nonconceptualism; we could, in perceiving, employ demonstrative concepts to represent the content that we then use to construct our nondemonstrative concepts.\textsuperscript{36} This would obviate the need for nonconceptual content in perceptual experience, while still allowing us to explain where the representational content of our concepts comes from.

While proper treatment of this objection requires an extensive foray into demonstratives and attention (See Roskies, Forthcoming), I will briefly sketch my strategy for countering this objection. We must first distinguish between two possible ways of conceiving of demonstrative concept formation. On one, having an experience just is acquiring a demonstrative concept; on the other, forming a demonstrative concept requires some sort of non-trivial psychological work. The former understanding of demonstrative concepts is the one to which conceptualists must appeal, but in doing so they err, both on empirical and on philosophical grounds. Demonstrative concept formation is non-trivial: it involves complex attentional mechanisms and person-level awareness. Equating experience with formation of a demonstrative concept, as the conceptualist must do, merely ignores or magically assumes what needs to be explained about concept formation, namely what it takes to convert an aspect of experience into a symbolic representation that can be used in thought.

The proper understanding of demonstrative concept formation requires that we recognize it as a psychologically sophisticated process. Demonstrative concept formation requires that attention is directed to and fixed upon the object or quality to be demonstrated. However, in order to appropriately focus attention, there must already be something articulated in our experience for us to focus our attention upon. Take visual experience, for example. Suppose we are going to form a demonstrative concept of an object O not previously encountered, for which we lack a concept. In order to form a demonstrative concept, we must delineate with attentional mechanisms that part of visual space that corresponds to O. However, since we have never before encountered O, we have no pre-experiential information about O’s boundaries. We

\textsuperscript{36} McDowell and Brewer invoke demonstrative concepts to respond to a different objection to conceptualism, the richness argument. However, I imagine that they would invoke them to account for concept learning as well.
must therefore rely upon the deliverances of experience to provide us with content representing that object, in order to successfully delineate it with attention. Since, by hypothesis, this something in our experience cannot be conceptual, it must be nonconceptual. Thus, demonstrative concept formation itself requires nonconceptual content, so it cannot provide the conceptualist with a way to avoid recognition of nonconceptual content of experience.

Part 5. Concluding Thoughts

Here I have argued that conceptualism entails concept nativism. I have suggested, furthermore, that the varieties of nativism open to the conceptualist are implausible. The implausibility of the types of nativism to which conceptualists must be committed provide a novel reason to dismiss conceptualism, and embrace the thesis that the content of experience is (at least partly) nonconceptual.

The extent to which experience involves nonconceptual states remains an open question. However, the basic intuitions which underlie the learning argument can be drawn upon to argue that nonconceptual states play an ongoing role in experience. Some conceptualists seem to suggest that considerations which apply to infants do not necessarily apply to mature human thinkers, implying that even if they were to have to assent to a role for nonconceptual content in experience during concept acquisition, no such admission would be necessary once basic concepts are acquired. I see little reason why such a basic mode of cognition should be invoked early in life only to be wholly supplanted, rather than merely augmented, by conceptual thought. It is implausible that nonconceptual content plays a role early in ontogeny, before a person masters the concepts she will employ as a fully conceptual thinker, but fails to play a role in the cognitive lives of mature thinkers. There is a case to be made for a role for ongoing nonconceptual content in experience, in novel concept learning, in the dynamic formation of demonstrative concepts, and in refinement of existing concepts. Recall the scenario we began with, your encounter with the 1982 Chateau Petrus. Due to your enthusiasm for the grape, you begin to attend wine-tastings on a regular basis, and over time, your conceptual repertoire becomes equally as sophisticated as your friend’s. While some of your sophistication will be explained in terms of concept learning, some may be explained in terms of refinement of concepts you already possess. An account of concept refinement will also make reference to nonconceptual content of experience.

37 The concept ‘object’ is insufficient for the task, for it does not provide discriminatory information that would guide our attention to correctly delineate O as opposed to some other object.
In addition to illuminating the nature of human experience, the debate about nonconceptual content has bearing on our understanding of how our mental lives relate to those of nonhuman animals. The argument from learning provides compelling reason to reject conceptualism. If indeed the content of human experience is nonconceptual, and, as many think, the content of animals’ mental states is wholly nonconceptual, then a strong version of a conceptualist ‘discontinuity thesis’ (the thesis that the nature of the representations that underlie human and animal mental lives differs in kind because the one is wholly conceptual, the other nonconceptual), is untenable. A rejection of this version of a discontinuity thesis still leaves open many extremely interesting questions about how to characterize animal mentality, and how it relates to our own mental lives.38

References


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