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## **Concepts, Attention, and Perception**

### **Abstract**

According to the conceptualist view in the philosophy of perception, we must possess concepts for all the objects, properties and relations which feature in our perceptual experiences. In this paper, I investigate the possibility of developing an argument against the conceptualist view by appealing to the notion of attention.

In Part One, I begin by setting out an apparently promising version of such an argument, a version which appeals to a link between attention and perceptual demonstrative concept possession. In Part Two, however, I show how the conceptualist can challenge what appears to be the key premise of the argument, and I go on to describe, in Part Three, an important further difficulty which we face if we attempt to overcome this challenge in a particular way. My conclusion will be that the conceptualist's challenge to the argument is convincing and hence that the argument remains inconclusive.

### **Introduction**

According to the conceptualist view in the philosophy of perception, we must possess concepts for all the objects, properties and relations which feature in our perceptual experiences.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I investigate the possibility of developing an argument against the conceptualist view by appealing to the notion of attention.

In Part One, I begin by setting out an apparently promising version of such an argument, a version which appeals to a link between attention and perceptual demonstrative concept possession. In Part Two, however, I show how the conceptualist can challenge what appears to be the key premise of the argument, and I go on to describe, in Part Three, an important further difficulty which we face if we attempt to overcome this challenge in a particular way. My conclusion will be that the conceptualist's challenge to the argument is convincing and hence that the argument remains inconclusive.

### **Part One: An Argument from Attention**

I begin with a statement of what I take to be the conceptualist's defining claim:

**Conceptualism:** Any (normal human adult) perceptual experience has the representational content that it does exclusively in virtue of its drawing into operation concepts that the subject of the experience possesses at the time of the experience.

How might one go about developing an argument against this view by appealing to the notion of attention? An immediate consequence of the view is that we must possess concepts for all the various objects, properties, and relations which feature in our experiences. This suggests that we may be able to develop an anti-conceptualist argument with roughly the following structure: (1) attention is necessary for concept-possession; but (2) we do not attend to all the objects, properties, and relations which feature in our

perceptual experiences, so (3) we do not possess concepts for all the objects, properties, and relations which feature in our perceptual experiences. Is this line of reasoning at all promising? I think that it certainly needs some refinement, but that it illustrates clearly enough the central idea: we shall try to develop an anti-conceptualist argument from attention which is based around two main premises, one which has to do with the necessity of attention for concept-possession, and one which has to do with our not attending to everything that we experience.<sup>2</sup>

What sort of refinement does our simple line of reasoning require? Let us start with the initial premise, which claims that attention is necessary for concept possession. We should note first that the exact notion of attention to which the premise is appealing needs to be clarified. However it also seems that whichever sense of attention is being appealed to, the premise is likely to be false as it stands. Consider my concept of conjunction, Henry VIII, or the Big Bang. In no obvious sense must I be attending to these things in order to possess concepts of them. In reformulating the first premise, then, it seems that we will need to do two things: we will need to isolate a class of concepts possession of which *does* plausibly require attention (of some kind or other), and we will then need to specify more precisely the kind of attention that is supposed to be required. Having done this, we can then adjust the other premise accordingly to preserve the argument's validity.

### **Perceptual Demonstrative Concepts**

Which concepts are plausibly such that in order to possess them, one must attend to

whatever they are concepts of? One natural answer would be - *perceptual demonstrative concepts*. Perceptual demonstrative concepts are those concepts that one might express most naturally by using phrases which include a linguistic demonstrative, and they are concepts possession of which is made possible (in some sense) by perceptual experiences which feature whatever it is that the concepts apply to.<sup>3</sup> So if I have a perceptual demonstrative concept of a particular shade of red, for example, this will be a concept that I can express most naturally by saying ‘*that* shade of red’ or just ‘*that* shade’, and my possessing this concept will depend on my enjoying an experience which represents something as being the shade.

Conceptualists typically regard such demonstrative concepts as crucial since they seem best suited to capture the *fine-grainedness*, or *determinacy* of (in particular) the properties and relations that feature in our experiences.<sup>4</sup> Only demonstrative concepts seem up to the job in this respect since it seems plausible that *non*-demonstrative, general concepts expressible by such terms as ‘red’ or even ‘burnt sienna’ lack the fine-grainedness of many (perhaps all) of the properties and relations that feature in our experiences.

For our purposes, perceptual demonstrative concepts are important because they seem to be just the sort of concepts possession of which might require attention to whatever they are concepts of: while it is not plausible that I must attend to conjunction (whatever that might mean) in order to possess a concept of conjunction, it seems a good deal more plausible that I must attend (in some sense) to *that* shade of red in order to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of the shade.

Let us accept, initially at any rate, that there is indeed at least *some* notion of attention on which it is true that attention is necessary for perceptual demonstrative concept possession. What exactly might this notion of attention be?

## **Attention**

One mistake that we need to avoid making here is to think that one can attend to something in the relevant sense only if one's eyes are focused on it. When you focus your eyes on an object, with the consequence that its image is projected onto a part of the retina called the fovea, you receive substantially more information from the object than you would have done had its image been projected onto some other part of the retina. It is clear, however, that you can attend to an object in the relevant sense even if its image is *not* projected onto the fovea in this way.

The distinction that psychologists make between 'overt' and 'covert' attention is helpful here. Imagine that you are at a cocktail party and you are there in order to spy on 'that woman' over in the corner. But you need to make sure that she does not discover that you are spying on her. What you should do is to attend to her *covertly* but not *overtly*: you should look at the woman out of the corner of your eye, as we would say, while keeping your overt gaze fixed firmly on the man with whom you are making polite small-talk.

The point here is that one can attend to something in the relevant sense without attending

overtly to it, without focusing one's eyes on it. But this still does not give us a positive characterisation of the notion of attention to which our argument is appealing. One way to provide such a characterisation would be simply to identify the relevant kind of attention with *noticing*: we could say that to attend to an object, property, or relation, is just, in the relevant sense, to notice it. On this view, it is possible to attend to the woman in the corner, in the relevant sense, without attending overtly to her, since it is possible to notice her without attending overtly to her.

Is the strategy of identifying attention with noticing satisfactory? An important point to note here is that if the strategy *were* satisfactory – if attention *were* noticing - then this would provide us with good reason to think that attention is indeed necessary for perceptual demonstrative concept possession. For possessing a perceptual demonstrative concept of something is possessing the ability to think about that thing, where the possession of the ability is made possible by a perceptual experience which features the thing; and it seems difficult to see why an experience should make the possession of such an ability possible unless its subject notices the thing in question.

On reflection, however, I think it is clear that it will not do simply to identify attention with noticing. The reason is that *attention is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon*; rather, it comes in degrees. If I am experiencing two objects, A and B, where I am attending more to A than I am to B, it might still be that I am attending to B to some extent. Think, for example, of the defender who is man-marking the opposing team's star centre-forward: it certainly seems likely that he will be attending more to the centre-forward than to



anything else that he is experiencing, but that need not prevent him from devoting at least *some* attention to the midfielder general trying to deliver the killer pass through to the centre-forward. Noticing, on the other hand, *does* seem to be an all-or-nothing phenomenon: it seems difficult to make sense of the idea that the defender might *notice* the centre-forward more than the midfielder general, while still noticing the midfielder general to some extent. Rather, the defender either notices the centre-forward or he does not. Ditto for the midfielder general. So since attention comes in degrees but noticing does not, we cannot simply identify attention with noticing.

For this reason, I think that we would do better to draw instead here on John Campbell's characterisation of attention as a kind of *experiential highlighting*. Campbell writes:

'To illustrate.... the fundamental point about conscious attention, suppose that you are sitting in a lecture and your mind wanders off a little, the lecture fails to grip. So you look around idly at the other people in the audience, your gaze resting now on this person, now on that. In effect, you highlight now one aspect of your experience, now another. In effect, you put a yellow highlighter now over one or another part of your visual experience....'<sup>5</sup>

Now suppose we follow Campbell in thinking of attending to a particular aspect of one's experience as being, in effect, a matter of putting a yellow highlighter over that aspect. But suppose also that we have at our disposal not just *one* kind of highlighter which we are able to put over a given aspect, but rather a *range* of highlighters of different kinds,

each of which highlights with a different degree of intensity. On this view, if I am experiencing objects A and B, it may be that I am attending more to A than I am to B, but still attending to B to some extent, for it may be that while I am highlighting both A and B, the highlighter that I am using on A highlights with a greater degree of intensity than the highlighter that I am using on B.

With such a conception of attention in place, we can explain what is going on both in the football case and in the cocktail party case: in the football case, the defender is highlighting both the centre-forward and the midfield general, but highlighting the centre-forward to a greater degree; in the cocktail party case, while your overt gaze may be fixed firmly on the man with whom you are making polite small-talk, you can nevertheless highlight him experientially to a lesser degree than that to which you highlight 'that woman' in the corner.

But if we do decide to appeal to this conception of attention as experiential highlighting, rather than to the conception of attention as noticing, is it still plausible that there is a connection between attending to an object, property, or relation, on the one hand, and possessing a perceptual demonstrative concept of it, on the other? To answer this question, we need to look again at the relation between attention and noticing. We have argued that since attention comes in degree but noticing does not, we cannot simply identify attention with noticing. But this leaves open the possibility that there may be an intimate relation of a different kind, other than identity, which holds between them. And indeed this seems plausible. For it seems plausible that if one attends to an object,

property, or relation *at least to a sufficiently high degree*, one is bound thereby to notice it. Perhaps the precise degree of attention which is sufficient for noticing may vary, both from subject to subject, and, for a given subject, from context to context. But given a particular subject and a particular context, it seems plausible nevertheless that there will be some degree,  $D$ , of attention, such that if the subject in that context attends to a thing to a degree equal to or greater than  $D$ , he is bound thereby to notice that thing.

More crucially for our immediate purposes, though, it also seems plausible that to notice an object, property, or relation, one must attend to it *at least to some degree*. Again, it might be that the degree of attention which is necessary for noticing can vary both from subject to subject and, for a given subject, from context to context. (And given a particular subject and a particular context, it might also be that the degree of attention which is necessary for noticing differs from the degree which is sufficient for noticing.) But the crucial point is that given a particular subject and a particular context, it seems plausible that there will be some degree,  $D^*$ , of attention, such that in order to notice a thing in that context, the subject must attend to the thing in question to a degree equal to or greater than  $D^*$ . This last point – that at least some degree of attention is necessary for noticing - is crucial since, as we noted earlier, it seems that noticing is necessary for perceptual demonstrative concept possession. So assuming that the crucial point is indeed correct, it follows that at least some degree of attention seems also to be necessary for perceptual demonstrative concept possession.

## **Kelly on Attention and Demonstrative Concepts**

At this point, however, I want to discuss an objection to the view that attention is necessary for demonstrative concept possession which has recently been given by Sean Kelly. Kelly notes that in the literature, it is commonly accepted that there is a 'knows which' condition on demonstrative concept possession: as Kelly characterises the idea,

‘In order to understand a perceptual-demonstrative term like “That person” (said while pointing in the direction of a large crowd), the subject must know which person is being pointed out. Without knowledge of which person is in question, the subject cannot entertain the proposition containing the demonstrative term that refers to him.’<sup>6</sup>

But Kelly goes on to argue that, plausibly, a subject can satisfy the 'knows which' requirement with respect to an object in his environment without attending to that thing. In particular, Kelly's argument turns on an appeal to an interesting kind of blindsight thought-experiment:

‘Suppose that the blindsighter has lived with his condition for many years. He's had a variety of helpful nurses and caretakers who have given him constant and reliable feedback about the various guesses about the environment that he sometimes makes. At first, of course, like any blindsighter, he resists the very idea that he has got access to any information about the environment at all. His nurses have to coax him into making guesses, from which he consistently disassociates himself. But with careful prodding, and

with extensive feedback, he eventually comes to recognise that the guesses he makes about the environment are remarkably reliable. Indeed, after years of practice he comes to trust his guesses about the environment in just the same way that a normal perceiver trusts his perceptions of it. He doesn't have conscious perceptions of the environment, of course, but he has a reliable, though non-conscious, mechanism for detecting objects in the environment and he comes to recognise that this mechanism is reliable. In such a case, I think we might be willing to admit that the subject, at least at times, knows which object he is non-consciously detecting.<sup>7</sup>

So according to Kelly, since it is plausible that the blindsighter meets the 'knows which' requirement with respect to some of the objects in his environment without attending to them, it is also plausible that attention is *not* necessary for demonstrative concept possession, at least not according to the standard view which holds that there is this 'knows which' condition on possession of such concepts.

The first thing to note about this argument is the rather peculiar logic which underlies it: the argument began with the observation that (according to a popular view) satisfaction of a 'knows which' requirement is necessary for demonstrative concept possession. The argument then went on to provide an example of a subject who satisfies the 'knows which' requirement with respect to a range of objects in his environment but does not attend to them. But it is not at all clear that Kelly is entitled to infer from this that there could be a subject who *possesses demonstrative concepts* of a range of objects in his environment without attending to them: given that satisfaction of the 'knows which'

requirement is only *necessary* for demonstrative concept possession, it might be that Kelly's blindsighter satisfies the 'knows which' requirement for the relevant objects but nevertheless fails to possess demonstrative concepts of them. (It is certainly *not* true that according to the popular Evansian line on demonstrative reference, satisfaction of the 'knows which' requirement is sufficient as well as necessary for demonstrative concept possession. For Evans, a crucial point is that satisfaction of the requirement is necessary for possession of concepts of *any* sort (descriptive and recognition-based, as well as demonstrative)).<sup>8</sup>

So it is open to us to agree with Kelly that the blindsighter satisfies the 'knows which' condition with respect to some of the objects in his environment while insisting that it does not follow that he possesses demonstrative concepts of such objects. But we might still think it independently plausible to credit the blindsighter (not only with satisfaction of the 'knows which' condition but also) with demonstrative concept possession. Should we in fact think this? It is not clear that we should. If we imagine, for example, the blindsighter pointing at an object in front of him and saying 'that object is F', would we really want to say that the concept of the object that he expresses is genuinely demonstrative? Or would we rather want to say that his concept is actually a descriptive concept, perhaps of the form 'the object that I am pointing at', or 'the object that I am detecting'? To my mind at least, the latter alternative seems rather more plausible.

But more importantly, I think that even if we accepted Kelly's conclusion, it would not threaten the idea that, in the sense relevant to our anti-conceptualist argument from

attention, attention is necessary for *perceptual* demonstrative concept possession. Recall that according to our characterisation of perceptual demonstrative concepts, they are concepts possession of which is made possible by perceptual experiences which feature whatever it is that the concepts apply to. But by hypothesis, Kelly's blindsighter does *not* experience the relevant objects in his environment. Hence it seems that regardless of whether the blindsighter succeeds in acquiring *some* sort of demonstrative concepts of the objects in his environment, these concepts would not in any case count as *perceptual* demonstrative concepts, at least not in the sense relevant to our argument.

(Might Kelly object to our characterisation of perceptual demonstrative concepts as those concepts possession of which is made possible by perceptual experiences which feature whatever it is that the concepts apply to? Perhaps. But a dispute over which types of demonstrative concepts count as 'perceptual' looks suspiciously terminological. Just as it is open to Kelly to understand the notion of a 'perceptual demonstrative concept' in a broader sense if he chooses, so too it is open to us to understand it in a narrower sense. The important point for our purposes is that whichever notion of 'perceptual demonstrative concept' we decide to use in constructing our anti-conceptualist argument from attention, we should remain consistent in this use so as to avoid risk of equivocation.)

The upshot is, I believe, that regardless of the success or failure of Kelly's argument on its own terms (and as I have indicated, I remain sceptical), we can be confident that the argument does not threaten the idea that according to a perfectly respectable sense of the

expression 'perceptual demonstrative concept', attention is necessary for perceptual demonstrative concept possession.

### **Adjusting the Argument**

I think, then, that the view that attention is necessary for perceptual demonstrative concept possession remains an attractive one. Where does this leave our argument from attention? It seems we are now in a position to reformulate the first premise as this:

**P1:** To possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of an object, property, or relation, one must attend (at least to some extent) to that object, property, or relation.

But in conjunction with our original second premise, which claimed that we do not attend to all the objects, properties, and relations which feature in our perceptual experiences, P1 does not yield the envisaged anti-conceptualist conclusion. For the two premises are jointly consistent with the possibility that we may possess *non* perceptual-demonstrative concepts (i.e. - concepts which are not perceptual demonstrative) for those objects, properties, and relations which feature in our experiences and to which we do not attend.

To remedy this problem, it seems that the argument really needs two other premises, aside from P1: it needs a premise which says that, for at least some of the objects, properties, and relations which feature in our experiences, we do not possess non perceptual-demonstrative concepts for such features; and it needs a premise which says



that we do not attend (to any extent) to at least some of these features:

**P2:** There are some objects, properties, or relations which feature in our perceptual experiences for which we do not possess non perceptual-demonstrative concepts. (Call these objects, properties, or relations for which we do not possess non perceptual-demonstrative concepts *NND features*.)

**P3:** We do not attend (to any extent) to at least some of the NND features which feature in our perceptual experiences.

If true, P1, P2, and P3 would together establish that we do not possess concepts for all the objects, properties, and relations which feature in our perceptual experiences. The conceptualist must therefore challenge (at least) one of these premises. Which of them should he try to challenge? We have already provided some intuitive reasons in favour of P1, and we have also seen that it is not threatened by Kelly's argument. What of P2 and P3?

P2 seems difficult to deny. As we noted above, it seems very plausible that non-demonstrative, general concepts lack the fine-grainedness of many of the properties and relations that feature in our experiences. Admittedly, it might be *possible* for us to possess concepts which match the fine-grainedness of the properties and relations that feature in our experiences, but which are neither general nor perceptual demonstrative: these would be concepts which *are* demonstrative, but possession of which is *not* made

possible by perceptual experiences which feature whatever it is that the concepts apply to - i.e. demonstrative concepts of the sort that Kelly's blindsighter possesses, if indeed he possesses demonstrative concepts of any sort. It seems clear, however, that to possess such concepts (assuming that this is indeed possible), one would need to undergo precisely the sort of extensive training that Kelly's blindsighter undergoes; so given that we do not in fact undergo such training, it seems clear that we do not possess concepts of this sort.

I think it is safe to say, then, that the conceptualist will not be able to mount a convincing challenge to P2: there will indeed be some objects, properties, or relations which feature in our perceptual experiences which are such that *if* we possess concepts of them at all, then they will be perceptual demonstrative concepts, possession of which is made possible by perceptual experiences which feature whatever it is that the concepts apply to. In short, some of the objects, properties, or relations which feature in our experiences will indeed be NND features.

This suggests that the conceptualist will be best advised to concentrate his efforts on challenging P3. P3 states that we do not attend (to any extent) to at least some of the NND features which feature in our perceptual experiences. This is a claim about NND features: those objects, properties and relations for which we do not possess non-perceptual-demonstrative concepts. But I think that we can safely set the NND feature/non-NND feature distinction to one side for the time being and focus on the slightly more general question of whether we attend (at least to some extent) to all the

objects, properties, and relations (NND features or not) that feature our experiences. For it seems that the key issue here is whether an object, property, or relation can feature in one's experience if one does not attend to it. And this seems to have little to do with whether the object, property, or relation in question is an NND feature: the issue of whether an object, property, or relation can feature in my experience if I do not attend to it, on the one hand, and the issue of whether I happen to possess a non perceptual-demonstrative concept for that object, property, or relation, on the other, seem simply to be unrelated.

So instead of considering P3 directly, let us rather consider the more general claim that it entails: the claim that we do not attend (to any extent) to at least some of the objects, properties, and relations that feature in our experiences. Let us call this more general claim P3\*. Is P3\* true?

## **Part Two: The Difficulty of Arguing for P3\***

### **The Concept of Highlighting**

An initial way in which we might try to argue for P3\* would be by straightforward appeal to the very concept of the kind of attention with which we are concerned. Recall that the kind of attention that is relevant here is a form of *highlighting*: one's attending to a particular aspect of one's experience is, in effect, a matter of one's putting a yellow highlighter over that aspect. But surely, the thought might be, the concept of highlighting

is related intimately to the concept of a *background*. In particular, one cannot coherently conceive of one's highlighting particular aspects of one's experience unless one also conceives of such highlighting taking place against a background which is *not* so highlighted. Granted, it may be that if one highlights aspects A and B, where A is highlighted to a greater degree than B, then B can in a sense form part of the background against which A is highlighted. But this still leaves the question of the background against which B is highlighted. More generally, the very concept of highlighting guarantees that, for whichever aspect of one's experience it is that is highlighted to the *least* degree, there must remain some unhighlighted background against which this takes place. So the very concept of highlighting guarantees that P3\* must be true: we do not attend (to any extent) to at least some of the objects, properties, and relations that feature in our experiences.

Is this reasoning effective? My view is that it is not. I agree that it is difficult to conceive of one's highlighting particular aspects of one's experience unless one also conceives of this highlighting taking place against a background which is not itself highlighted. We are not entitled to assume without further argument, though, that the background against which such highlighting takes place is itself an *experiential* background. Perhaps the truth of the matter is that we highlight some but not all of the aspects which fall within our visual field, that we experience only those aspects that are highlighted, and that these aspects are highlighted against a background composed of those (non-experienced) aspects which are not highlighted. And the need to allow for such a possibility establishes, I believe, that one cannot argue effectively for P3\* via a straightforward

appeal to the concept of highlighting.

### **The Introspection Strategy**

What alternative strategy might we adopt, then, in arguing for P3\*? One such strategy that might seem promising is that of appealing to introspective evidence. In particular, we might be tempted to appeal to the evidence that we can gain by introspecting on especially *rich* experiences, experiences that feature a large number of objects, properties and relations. For it seems plausible, initially at any rate, that the greater the number of objects, properties and relations that feature in an experience, the less likely it is that the subject of the experience will be able to attend to all of them.

For example, consider the experience I would enjoy if I were to look at a large board covered in a mass of dots. We mustn't assume here that I experience every dot on the board even if the whole board falls within my visual field, since, as we have noted, we must allow for a distinction between what falls within one's visual field and what one experiences. Nevertheless it does seem tempting to think that in this situation, I can tell straightforwardly enough through introspection that I am experiencing a large number of dots, and that this number will be greater than the number of dots to which I am attending.

I think that we need to be careful, however, in appealing to this sort of intuition in arguing for P3\*. Earlier, we decided that if one does not attend to a thing (to any extent at

all), then one fails to notice it. If this is right, then to claim that I am experiencing more dots than I am attending to is to claim that I am experiencing more dots than I am noticing. But it seems difficult to see exactly how I could be justified, on the basis of introspection, in thinking that there are dots that I am experiencing, but not noticing. For if I do not notice a dot, then how can I be so sure that I am experiencing it?

### **The Foreground/Background Distinction**

It is not immediately clear, then, just how the evidence that we are able to gain through introspecting on rich experiences can provide any support for P3\*. At this point, however, we might suggest that there may be a different introspectively accessible quality of experience, other than its richness, that is crucial here.

Earlier, we saw the difficulties facing the attempt to establish the truth of P3\* via an appeal to the link that there seems to be between the concept of highlighting and the concept of a background. We agreed that one cannot coherently conceive of one's highlighting particular aspects of one's experience unless one also conceives of this highlighting taking place against a background which is not so highlighted. But it would be too quick, we then observed, to assume without further argument that the background against which such highlighting takes place must itself be an experiential background.

But perhaps we might suggest at this point that we can in fact provide further argument in favour of the view that the background against which experiential highlighting takes

place is itself an experiential background. For perhaps there is significant introspective evidence to which we can appeal which would support such a view. Philippe Chuard, who has recently argued for a view very close to P3\*, makes something like this sort of appeal, citing the following example of Barry Dainton's:

‘You are sitting in an armchair, you have stopped daydreaming and have become engrossed in your book, which has taken an interesting turn, when suddenly the *entire* phenomenal background disappears, not just peripheral sound and vision, but mood and bodily experience too. The effect would be dramatic: it would seem as though the surrounding world had vanished, and your body with it. You would not feel the surrounding and supporting armchair; and since the surrounding room would no longer be present in your experience - save for the page of the book you were reading - you would be both surrounded and filled by void, physically and emotionally.’<sup>9</sup>

The moral that Chuard draws from this is that:

‘Clearly many of our visual experiences are unlike the one described in Dainton's thought-experiment. Phenomenologically, visual experiences seem to have a background: they represent more than just what is attended to or noticed.’<sup>10</sup>

So the suggestion is that through introspection, we can find *at the level of experience* a difference between the foreground and the background, and that we should account for this by saying that there is a corresponding difference between those experiential features

to which we *do* attend, on the one hand, and those experiential features to which we *do not* attend, on the other.

I am not sure, though, that this suggestion is correct. I agree that since it certainly seems right that most of our experiences are not at all like the one that Dainton describes, we do need to make room, at the level of experience, for some sort of foreground/background distinction. And this remains so even if one maintains that there is, in addition, a wholly non-experiential background against which experiential highlighting can take place. But I do not think that we can infer from this that our experiences represent some features that we do not attend to (and hence that P3\* is true). For I think that we can give a plausible account of the foreground/background distinction that there seems to be at the level of experience, while maintaining that we do attend to every feature that we experience.

Earlier we observed that attention comes in degrees. If I am experiencing two objects, A, and B, where I am attending more to A than I am to B, it might still be that I am attending to B to some extent. So in Dainton's case, for example, it may be that the experiencer is attending more to the particular sentence that he is currently reading than he is to the previous sentence, but it might still be that he is attending more to the previous sentence than he is to, say, the corner of the page. But given that this is so, given that attention does come in degrees in this way, then instead of accounting for the experiential background by appealing to experiential features that we do not attend to at all, we can rather explain it by appeal to the differing *extents* to which we attend to such features: on this view, the extent to which a feature figures in the foreground of an experience rather



than its background will be determined by the extent to which the subject attends to it. And this explanation is of course compatible with an insistence that experiencing something requires that the subject attend to it at least to *some* degree.

It does seem possible, then, to give a coherent account of the foreground/background distinction that there seems to be at the level of experience without appealing to experiential features that go entirely unattended to. Indeed, I think that the sort of account that I have just sketched actually provides a *better* explanation of the phenomenology of the experiential background than the alternative account: in my own case at least, it seems that even among those experiential features which seem more generally to count as background rather than as foreground features, some such features still seem to be *closer* to the foreground than others. (Think of the football case again: the midfield general seems generally to count as a background feature of the defender's experience, but he still seems to be closer to the foreground of the experience than, say, the opposing team's goalkeeper.) And it seems very natural to account for this aspect of the phenomenology by saying that although the experiencer does not attend to any of the various background features as much as he does to the foreground features, there are still differences in the *extent* to which he attends to these background features. But of course it would not be open to us to provide this sort of straightforward account if we insisted that the experiencer does not attend to any of the background features at all.

### **The Fundamental Problem**

Moreover, I think that the initial problem that the introspection strategy faced still applies here: recall that the initial problem was that it seemed difficult to see how one could be justified, on the basis of introspection, in thinking that one is experiencing, but not noticing something - if one does not notice something, then it is not clear how one can be at all sure that one is experiencing it. Chuard's suggestion was that we do not attend to the features which figure in the background of our experiences. But again, if such features really do go entirely unattended to, and hence unnoticed, then it is not clear how we could be justified in thinking that they do genuinely figure in the background of our experiences (as opposed to not figuring in our experiences at all). To be justified in believing that one's experience of reading a book is *not* like Dainton's case, it seems that one would have at least to notice the relevant background features.

Indeed the general problem here seems a pretty fundamental one for the strategy of arguing for P3\* by appealing to introspective evidence. P3\* claims that some of the things that feature in our experiences are things to which we do not attend. So P3\* is a claim about the sorts of things that feature in our experiences. And one might think that we should look to introspective evidence in trying to establish the truth of such a claim since, generally speaking, it is possible to find out what one is experiencing through introspection. But the problem is that it seems impossible to discover through introspection that one is experiencing *something to which one is not attending*, and hence not noticing, since one can only discover through introspection that one is experiencing something if one notices it. Searching one's experience introspectively for something to which one is not attending seems to be a case of searching a domain for something that

has the property of not turning up in the search. And this seems a hopeless task.

Note that none of this need constitute a positive argument *against* P3\*. It might indeed be impossible, if one searches a domain, to turn up something that has the property of not turning up in the search. But this does not establish that the domain does not in fact contain something with that property. And similarly, it might indeed be impossible, if one searches one's experience introspectively, to find something to which one is not attending; but this does not establish that one's experience does not in fact feature something to which one is not attending. The problem that we have encountered is a problem for the strategy of arguing for P3\* *in a certain way*, namely by appealing to introspective evidence; it is not a problem with, or an argument against, P3\* itself.

But given that there is this problem for the strategy of arguing for P3\* by appealing to introspective evidence, I think that we would do better to set the strategy to one side and investigate instead the possibility of arguing for it in some other way. How might this be done?

### **The Discrimination Strategy**

One alternative approach would be to appeal to failures of perceptual *discrimination*. To see the basic idea here, consider the following example (borrowed from Fred Dretske):

You are first shown one complex array of shapes and patterns, and then another.

Although the two arrays are very similar, there is a slight difference between them: the second contains an extra spot not present in the first. Since the arrays are so similar, though, you cannot tell any difference between them - for all you can tell they are exactly the same.<sup>11</sup>

The thought then would be that while your experience of the second array features an element (the extra spot) which did not feature in your experience of the first array, we have evidence that you do not attend to this element: the fact that you cannot tell any difference between the two arrays. And if so, we have evidence which tells in favour of P3\*.

The argument is far from conclusive, however. Suppose we concede (though this is not obvious) that there is indeed a difference not merely between the two arrays themselves, but also between the ways in which your experiences present those arrays: your experience of the second does indeed feature a spot which did not feature in your experience of the first. The question would then be this: does your inability to tell any difference between the two arrays in fact establish that you do not attend to the spot in question? The answer to this question is 'no'. Indeed it remains plausible that you (not merely attend to, but) notice the spot in question. The reason, in essence, is that (like attention) noticing is guise-relative: one can notice a thing under one guise but fail to notice it under another. So it may be that although you notice the spot, you do not notice it *as an element which constitutes a difference between the two arrays*. It may be that you simply notice the spot *as a spot*. And if so, this would provide an equally good

explanation of your inability to tell any difference between the two arrays.<sup>12</sup> The conclusion to be drawn, I believe, is that the proposed strategy is ineffective: we cannot establish the truth of P3\* by appealing to failures of perceptual discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Memory Strategy**

A potentially more promising alternative to the introspection strategy would be to look to *memory*. The thought here would be that even if one cannot establish that one is experiencing, but not noticing, something by introspecting on the experience when one is actually having it, one *can* establish that one has experienced, but not noticed, something by later remembering what one earlier experienced. This strategy seems to avoid the difficulty that the introspection strategy faced, since although one must, in a sense, notice something in order to remember that one has experienced it, the noticing in question takes place at the time of the remembering, not at the time of the experiencing.

Mike Martin adopts this sort of approach when arguing for the claim, closely related to P3\*, that one can fail to notice how things appear to one. Of course, there is an important difference between this claim and P3\* since, as we have seen, although attention and noticing are closely related, they are not identical. Nevertheless, if Martin's argument were to turn out to be effective, then that should be of some interest to us, for it would suggest that we might be able to adapt his argument into an effective argument for P3\*.

Martin's argument begins with an appeal to the following case:

‘Suppose that someone, Archie, is looking for a cuff link. He looks in a drawer but fails to notice it and continues searching the room. Eventually he gives up and leaves for dinner. On the way to dinner, he agitatedly thinks back to his search of the room... Suddenly he realizes that the cuff link was in the drawer but that he had failed to notice it.’<sup>14</sup>

So the crucial question for Martin is whether Archie experienced, but did not notice, the cuff link when he looked in the drawer. Was this in fact the case? Suppose we accept the assumption, which Martin builds into his description of the case, that Archie did not notice the cuff link when he looked in the drawer. What reason have we to think that Archie experienced the cuff link when he looked in the drawer? This is where Martin’s appeal to memory comes in: the idea is essentially that we *do* have evidence that Archie experienced the cuff link when he looked in the drawer, namely the *memory* experience that Archie later enjoys on his way to dinner – the fact that it later seems to Archie that the cuff link was in the drawer at the time of his original search.

Why should we think that this is so? Why should we think that Archie’s later memory experience is evidence that he experienced the cuff link at the time of the search? After all one might concede that Archie’s memory experience is evidence that the cuff link was there, in the drawer, at the time of the search, without conceding that it is evidence that he *experienced* the cuff link at the time of the search.

Martin would agree that Archie's memory experience is evidence that the cuff link was in the drawer at the time of the search; but he would argue that this is only *because* Archie experienced the cuff link at the time of the search. For according to Martin,

'memories are sources of information about the past; they are also derivative sources of information, dependent for any authority they have on past perception.'<sup>15</sup>

So the thought here is that it is not by magic that Archie's later memory experience is evidence that the cuff link was in the drawer at the time of the search. Rather it is so *in virtue of* the fact that he perceived the cuff link at the time of the search. For had Archie *not* perceived the cuff link at the time of the search, then if the later memory experience *were* in fact veridical - if the cuff link *was* in fact in the drawer at the time of the search - this would be sheer fluke.

There is clearly something right about this, but I am not sure that it is quite the point that Martin needs, or indeed that we would need as part of an attempt to establish the truth of P3\*. The conclusion that Martin wanted is that Archie experienced the cuff link at the time of the search. Martin's argument for this conclusion is that (1) Archie's later memory experience is evidence that the cuff link was in the drawer at the time of the search, and that (2) this can only be so if Archie perceived the cuff link at the time of the search. (1) seems clearly true. (2) also seems true since, as Martin claims, the evidential authority of memory experience is dependent on past perception. But it is not so clear that the evidential authority of memory experience is dependent on past perceptual

*experience*. For if there is a distinction between *perception* and perceptual *experience*, then it would open to Martin's opponent to concede that the evidential authority of Archie's memory experience is dependent on a past perception, without conceding that it is dependent on a past perceptual experience.

The idea here would be this. The evidential authority of Archie's memory experience is clearly, in some sense, dependent on his having perceived the cuff link at the time of the search. But since Archie did not notice the cuff link at the time of the search (Martin's opponent might claim) his perceiving the cuff-link cannot have been a genuinely experiential episode: Archie must have taken in information from the cuff link at the time of the search, but this information must have been taken in at the sub-personal level, not at the personal level. So the evidential authority of Archie's memory experience is indeed dependent on his having perceived the cuff link at the time of the search but *in the sense that* it is dependent on Archie's having appropriately taken in information from the cuff link at the sub-personal level.

Indeed, I myself take this to be an effective response to Martin's argument: I cannot see anything to prevent Martin's opponent from replying to him by distinguishing between perception and perceptual experience in this way. And given this, I think that we need to conclude that Martin's strategy fails: we will not be able to establish the truth of P3\* by appealing to memory.



### **Part Three: Re-adjusting the Argument**

The position, then, is this. We have seen that given the plausibility of the first two premises of our argument from attention, it seems that the conceptualist has to respond to the argument by challenging P3. But we have also seen that the conceptualist may well be able to do this convincingly, since he can point to apparently serious difficulties which face the various strategies that might be adopted in arguing for the parallel claim P3\*.

Does this mean that we should concede defeat at this point and admit that our challenge to the conceptualist has failed? My view is that we should not. I agree that given our failure to find any effective argument in favour of P3\*, we should concede that our argument from attention, as it stands, is not conclusive. However, we need also to investigate the possibility, I believe, that there may yet remain a more promising version of the argument available to us, a version the effectiveness of which does not rely on there existing any effective argument in favour of P3\*.

#### **The Idea**

How might we arrive at this potentially more promising version of the argument? To see how, we need to look again at what we took to be the fundamental problem for the strategy of arguing for P3\* via an appeal to introspection. We decided that the fundamental problem for such a strategy consists in this fact: it seems impossible to discover through introspection that one is experiencing something to which one is not

attending *to any extent at all*, since the fact that one discovers through introspection that one is experiencing a thing seems to entail that one notices it, and hence that one attends to it at least to *some* degree. But suppose now that whatever precisely the degree of attention that is required (for a particular subject in a particular context) to notice a thing, it is *less* than the degree of attention that is required (for that subject in that context) to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of that thing. If this is so, then even if the fact that one discovers through introspection that one is experiencing a thing entails that one notices it, and hence that one attends to it at least to some degree, it need not entail that one attends to the thing to the degree required to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of it. So even if it is impossible to discover through introspection that one is experiencing something to which one is not attending to any extent at all, it might for all this remain possible to discover through introspection that one is experiencing a thing to which one is not attending to the extent required to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of that thing.

This suggests that we might arrive at a more promising version of our argument from attention if we revise

**P3:** We do not attend (to any extent) to at least some of the NND features which feature in our perceptual experiences.

to

**P3 (REV):** We do not attend to at least some of the NND features which feature in our perceptual experiences to the extent required to possess perceptual demonstrative concepts of those features.

Our revised version of the argument will then consist of P3 (REV) along with the original second premise, P2; P1 drops out as redundant.

So the idea is that this revised version of the argument may turn out to be more promising than the original version because it may turn out that we are in a better position to argue for P3 (REV), as opposed to P3, by appealing to introspective evidence. It will help again here to set the NND feature/non-NND feature distinction to one side and focus not on P3 (REV) directly, but rather on the more general claim that it entails: the claim that we do not attend to at least some of the objects, properties, and relations (NND features or not) that feature in our experiences to the extent required to possess perceptual demonstrative concepts of those objects, properties, and relations. Let us call this more general claim P3 (REV)\*. The key point is then that the fundamental problem which was faced by the strategy of arguing for P3\* by appealing to introspection seems not to be faced by the strategy of arguing for P3 (REV)\* by appealing to introspection. Or at least not if the degree of attention that is required to notice a thing is less than the degree of attention required to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of that thing.

But how exactly should we argue for P3 (REV)\* by appealing to introspection? What specific evidence is there which is introspectively available to us and which would

support the claim? Let us return to consider the case in which I look at a large board covered in a mass of dots. Suppose we are right to think that in such a case, I cannot tell through introspection that I am experiencing dots to which I am not attending to any extent at all. Nevertheless, the thought might be, it remains plausible that I *can* tell through introspection that I am experiencing many dots to which I am not attending to the extent required to conceptualise them *individually* - to think of them as 'this dot' or 'that dot'. And if this is so, then it looks like just the sort of evidence which might indeed establish the truth of P3 (REV)\*.

### **The Problem**

There is a problem, however. For the conceptualist may concede that in a case in which I look at a large board covered in a mass of dots, I am indeed in a position to tell that I am not attending to many of these dots to the extent required to conceptualise them individually. But he might then question the idea that I am in a position to tell that I am *experiencing* these dots individually. Perhaps the truth of the matter is that I experience only a mass of dots, without experiencing individually (the majority of) the dots that I know must in fact compose the mass. And if this is the correct account of the case, then it no longer provides any support for P3 (REV)\*.

(Perhaps it might be thought incoherent to suppose that one could experience a mass of dots without experiencing individually the dots that in fact compose the mass. But this is not obvious. Some analogies with other forms of representation may be helpful here.

Consider, for example the contrast between photographic representation and linguistic representation: while it seems that one cannot photograph a mass of dots without photographing the individual dots that compose the mass, it seems one can write or say things about a mass of dots without writing or saying anything about any individual dot. And perhaps experiential representation is less like photographic representation and more like linguistic representation in this respect.)<sup>16</sup>

Indeed I think that the fact that it seems open to the conceptualist to provide such a rival account of the dots case illustrates a slightly different general problem which is faced by the strategy of arguing for P3 (REV)\* by appealing to introspective evidence. For it seems that in order to establish the truth of P3 (REV)\* by appeal to introspective evidence, we need to find a case in which it is clear *both* that one can tell through introspection that one is genuinely experiencing an object, property, or relation, *and* that one can tell that one is not attending to the object, property, or relation in question to the extent required to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of it. And I think that the general problem is that for any given case, the clearer it is that the one of these things is true of it, the less clear it will be that the other is true of it. So if we find a case in which it is clear that one can tell through introspection that one is genuinely experiencing an object, property, or relation, it seems unlikely also to be clear, in such a case, that one can tell that one is not attending to the object, property, or relation in question to the extent required to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of it; and if we find a case in which it is clear that one can tell that one is not attending to an object, property, or relation to the extent required to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of it, it

seems unlikely also to be clear, in such a case, that one can tell through introspection that one is genuinely experiencing the object, property, or relation in question.

The dots case provides an illustration of this problem: although it seems clear that I can tell that I am not attending to many of the dots on the board to the extent required to possess perceptual demonstrative concepts of them individually, it remains rather less clear that I can tell through introspection that I am genuinely experiencing these dots individually. And the problem seems then to be that if we revise the case so as to make it appear more plausible that I can tell through introspection that I am genuinely experiencing the dots individually (e.g. by supposing that I attend to the individual dots more closely), we are likely thereby to make it appear less plausible that I can tell that I am not attending to the dots to the extent required to possess perceptual demonstrative concepts of them individually.

So although it seems true that the strategy of arguing for P3 (REV)\* by appeal to introspection does not face quite the same fundamental problem which was faced by the strategy of arguing for P3\* by appeal to introspection, it also seems that the former strategy faces its own, slightly different general problem. The end result seems to be that the prospects for arguing for either claim by appeal to introspection look bleak.

## **Conclusion**

We saw earlier that it seems open to the conceptualist to challenge the key premise, P3,

of our original argument from attention given the difficulties which face the various strategies that might be adopted in arguing for the parallel claim P3\*. In response to this challenge, we then tried revising the argument by revising P3 to P3 (REV). However, we have now seen that it will be no straightforward matter either to establish the truth of P3 (REV), given the general problem that seems to be faced by the strategy of arguing for P3 (REV)\* by appealing to introspection. The upshot is, I believe, that we have failed to construct a conclusive anti-conceptualist argument from attention.

What conclusion should be drawn from this failure? We are not entitled, of course, to conclude that it is impossible to construct any conclusive anti-conceptualist argument from attention: perhaps there does in fact exist an effective strategy, other than those which we have discussed, in which one can establish the truth either of P3 or of P3 (REV); or perhaps there exists a version of the argument which is conclusive, but which has a structure quite different from those versions which we have considered. I think that we are, though, entitled to conclude from what has been said that insofar as the anti-conceptualist wants to argue for his position by appealing to the notion of attention, the ball remains very much in his own court.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For expressions of this view, see (e.g.) McDowell, 1994, and Brewer, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> An anti-conceptualist argument with roughly this structure is discussed in Chuard, 'The Riches of Experience'.

<sup>3</sup> One needs to be careful, in specifying the sense in which perceptual experiences make possession of perceptual demonstrative concepts possible, not to beg the question against either the conceptualist or his opponent. Both parties can agree, however, that a perceptual experience which features a particular object, property, or relation makes it possible for its subject to possess a perceptual demonstrative concept of that object, property, or relation in the sense that had the experiencer not enjoyed an experience which featured the object, property, or relation in question, he would not have possessed the concept. Cf. Brewer, 2005, pp. 221-222.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. McDowell, 1994, pp.56-60, and Brewer, 1999, pp.170-4.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, 2002, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, 2004, p. 280.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 283-284.

<sup>8</sup> See (e.g.) Evans, 1982, Ch. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Dainton, 2000, p.32; quoted by Chuard, 'The Riches of Experience', p.14.

<sup>10</sup> Chuard, 'The Riches of Experience', p.14. Chuard focuses mainly on the implications of Dainton's case for visual experience, but the point presumably applies to the other modalities too.

<sup>11</sup> Dretske, 1993, p.273. Cf. Chuard, 'The Riches of Experience', p.13.

<sup>12</sup> This objection to the discrimination strategy mirrors an objection that David Rosenthal



makes to the way in which Dretske himself appeals to the envisaged case. (Though Dretske uses the case to argue not for P3\*, but rather for the claim that one can consciously experience an item even if one is not conscious that one is doing so.) See Rosenthal, 2005, pp. 113-114.

<sup>13</sup> See Pelling, 2007, for further discussion of the relation between conceptualism and perceptual discrimination.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, 2003, p.240.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 240-1.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Dennett, 1969, pp. 132-141.

<sup>17</sup> Many thanks to Stephan Blatti, Jonathan Dancy, Phil Goff, Hemdat Lerman, Bill Lycan, Ram Neta, Galen Strawson, Daniel Whiting, and various referees - and to audiences at Reading and UNC Chapel Hill.

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