On The Possibility of Conceptually Structured Experience:
Demonstrative Concepts and Fineness of Grain


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Abstract: In this paper I consider one of the influential challenges to the notion that perceptual experience might be completely conceptually structured, a challenge that rests on the idea that conceptual structure cannot do justice to the _fineness of grain_ of perceptual experience. In so doing, I canvass John McDowell’s attempt to meet this challenge by appeal to the notion of _demonstrative concepts_ and review some criticisms recently leveled at McDowell’s deployment of demonstrative concepts for this purpose by Sean D. Kelly. Finally, I suggest that, though Kelly’s criticisms might challenge McDowell’s original presentation of demonstrative concepts, a modified notion of demonstrative concept is available to the conceptualist that is proof against Kelly’s criticisms.

1.

It would seem to be a truism to claim that perceptual experience can provide us with information about the world—i.e., that perceptual experience has informational content. Additionally, it would seem equally undeniable that we may appeal to the information we receive in perceptual experience to ground our judgments about the world and our actions in it. Furthermore, as many—if not most—philosophers hold, those judgments are structured by the deployment of concepts on the part of thinkers. Indeed, it is the conceptual structure of judgments to which philosophers appeal in explaining how it is that judgments can rationalize further judgments or actions, by serving as premises in theoretical or practical reasoning. These widely accepted theses about perceptual experience, judgment, and reason, however, would seem to raise a significant question: how are we to understand the structure of perceptual experience?

The problems here should not be difficult to see. If we suppose that perceptual experience is _not_ conceptually structured, this would seem to make it difficult to understand how it might be that perceptual experience could rationalize
the judgments about the world and our actions in it that appeal to that perceptual experience. On the conceptual structure model of judgment, we understand how it is that judgments can rationalize other judgments—viz., by virtue of the conceptual relations that hold between the judgments in question and the inferences that those conceptual relations underwrite. There is no analogous, widely accepted model to explain how it is that non-conceptually structured information could rationalize judgment.

If, on the other hand, we suppose that perceptual experience is conceptually structured, we run up against deep and widely held intuitions that this simply cannot be. The intuitive resistance to conceptually structured perceptual experience is often inchoate, but its features often include appeals to the informational repleteness, fineness of grain, and situation dependency of perceptual experience, as compared to the relative austerity of conceptually structured thoughts or judgments.

In what follows, we will focus on one of these sources of criticism—the fineness of grain of perceptual experience—and one response to that criticism, on the part of John McDowell, deploying the notion of demonstrative concepts. We will then consider a rejoinder to McDowell on the part of non-conceptualism by Sean D. Kelly, who suggests that McDowell’s own notion of concepts precludes his deployment of demonstrative concepts to respond to the fineness of grain objection. We will suggest that, though Kelly might be correct with respect to McDowell’s initial way of thinking about demonstrative concepts, an alternate notion of concept is available to McDowell that would afford him a defense against Kelly’s criticisms.

Thus, the scope of the discussion here is limited. What we will provide, even if successful, is only a partial defense of conceptualism, a defense against the nonconceptualist charge that perceptual experience is too fine-grained to be completely conceptually structured. This discussion, however, should be of value to both the conceptualist and the nonconceptualist alike. For the conceptualist, the benefit should be apparent. Even the nonconceptualist, however, should profit from the demonstration that the argument from fineness of grain—at least as so far proffered—is unsuccessful. For such a demonstration will, at the very least, help the non-conceptualist to sharpen her attacks on the conceptualist; at best, it might help to get clearer about what is at issue in the debate between conceptualism and non-conceptualism.

2.

Before we turn to a consideration of the fineness of grain argument against conceptualism and McDowell’s response to it, it will be useful at least briefly to
consider what is meant by the conceptualists and non-conceptualists respectively. The notion of non-conceptually structured content is contrastive—its contentfulness rests on our ability to motivate a notion of conceptually structured content. Of course, there are many philosophical positions regarding the nature of concepts and their role in thought. For our purposes here, however, little should turn on these questions. Rather, it should suffice for our discussion to clarify the point at issue by sketching a view about the way concepts are related to judgments and then considering an analogue in the case of perception. Consider the following thesis:

The conceptual structure of judgment (CJ): In order for a subject S to judge that F(x), for any property F and object x, S must have concepts of F and x and S’s judgment must be structured in virtue of S’s employing those concepts in thought.

Thus, what it is for a judgment to be conceptually structured, on this sketch, is for the subject making that judgment to have the concepts in question and for the judgment itself to have the structure that it does in virtue of the subject’s employment of those concepts.

Thus, for our purposes here, to say that a judgment is conceptually structured is to say that the ability of a subject to make certain judgments is constrained by his conceptual capacities: a subject can only make those judgments containing concepts that that subject actually possesses. Thus, if the subject does not have the concepts of oakiness and peatiness, for example, then the subject will not be able to think that this bourbon is oaky, say, or that that single malt is peaty.

Given this notion of what it is for a judgment to be conceptually structured, we may thus formulate the parallel thesis with respect to perceptual experience:

The conceptual structure of perceptual experience (CPE): In order for a subject S to have the perceptual experience that F(x), for any property F and object x, S must have concepts of F and x and S’s perceptual experience must be structured in virtue of S’s employing those concepts in experience.

Note that the claim here is not that, as Millar has described the relation between conception and perception, “the role of conceptual capacities in perception is to extract information from experience in a form in which it can be stored and retrieved and fed into our thinking.” (Millar [1991], 496) Rather, the conceptualist wishes to reject this way of thinking of the relation between concepts and experience, claiming instead that concepts form the structure of the experiences themselves.
As we saw in section 1, one of the most powerful motivations for conceiving of perceptual experience as conceptually structured is that our judgments and actions seem to be rationally constrained by our perceptual experiences and that, given that rational relations, for the conceptualist, can only be understood as relations both of the relata of which are conceptually structured, we must, therefore, conceive of experiences as being conceptually structured. One of the challenges for the conceptualist, however, is to make a case for the idea that experience is conceptually structured, given that the following thesis seems extremely plausible:

The fineness of grain thesis [Phenomenology]: The richness and informational repleteness of perceptual experience suggests that the content of perception is more finely-grained than can be accommodated by our conceptual capacities.6

McDowell’s answer lies in the employment of a notion of demonstrative concepts. Demonstrative concepts are concepts—such as “that color”—that use a demonstrative expression to pick out the mode of presentation of the object or property experienced. McDowell introduces the notion of demonstrative concepts to argue against Evans’ point that the fine-grainedness of experience precludes our understanding it as conceptually structured.7 In response to this, McDowell suggests,

In the throes of an experience of the kind that putatively transcends one’s conceptual powers—an experience that ex hypothesi forms a suitable sample—one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like “that shade”, in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of the sample. (McDowell [1996a], 56-7)

Since such concepts are demonstrative, they have the advantage of being context sensitive—that is, their semantic value depends upon the context in which they are applied. Given this, however, it seems that the possibility of employing demonstrative concepts makes it possible to understand how it is that perceptual experience could be conceptually structured without violating [Phenomenology]. For plausibly, it is the ability to use demonstratives and other indexical components in thought that makes it possible for our perceptual experience to be as finely grained as [Phenomenology] requires.

Indeed, it has been argued that the content of perception is best understood as demonstrative. Thus, N. H. Smith has argued that “[a]n essential part of the content of any perceptual experience is the ‘demonstrative’ content ascribed by ‘this’ or ‘that’ in a phenomenological description.” (Smith [1988], 45) Furthermore, as
Smith suggests, it is precisely the demonstrative character of perceptual experience that accounts for the particular, sensuous presence of objects in perception:

The demonstrative, acquainting content in a perception intentionally appeals to the sensuous presence of the object to the subject: the object’s being appropriately located before the subject and causally affecting his senses on the occasion of the perceptual experience. … Implicit as well … is a sense of the individuality of the object. (Smith [1988], 45)

Thus, if it is indeed possible that there be demonstrative concepts, then there would seem to be no obstacle to understanding the “essential part of the content of perceptual experience” as conceptually structured.

4.

The difficulty for McDowell with respect to the possibility of there being demonstrative concepts is that McDowell accepts the following condition on demonstrative concept possession:

[Persistence] In order to possess a demonstrative concept for x, “the very same capacity to embrace x in mind can in principle persist beyond the duration of the experience itself.” (McDowell [1996a], 57)

The problem that acceptance of [Persistence] poses for McDowell is that it seems obvious that a person could conceivably be able to experience, say, a given color patch in an array of color patches in one moment, while at the next instant be unable to identify that color patch in a different array of color patches. As we will see below, this is the sort of case that Kelly presents as a challenge to McDowell. The problem that Kelly raises, then, is this. McDowell accepts that, in order to possess demonstrative concepts, one must satisfy [Persistence]; in order to have a perceptual experience, however, one need not satisfy the perceptual analogue of [Persistence].

Thus, our capacity to experience perceptually exceeds our capacity to conceive demonstratively. Perceptual experience cannot be wholly conceptually structured.

Of course, this problem is only a problem for the possibility of cashing out the conceptual structure of perceptual experience in terms of demonstrative concepts if McDowell is correct to suppose that [Persistence] is a constraint on demonstrative concept possession. McDowell, however, provides no clear argument for supposing this to be the case. Thus, if one wished to maintain that demonstrative concepts do provide us with a route to understanding the way in which perceptual experience is
conceptually structured, the easiest response to the challenge that Kelly sketches is simply to deny [Persistence].

However, Kelly does not believe that such a move is available to the defender of the conceptual content of perceptual experience. This is because, although perception does not necessarily involve the ability of the perceiving subject to re-identify the objects and properties perceived, conception DOES require such an ability. That is, unlike perception, demonstrative concept possession is governed by the following condition:

[Re-Identification] In order to possess a demonstrative concept for \(x\), a subject must be able consistently to re-identify a given object or property as falling under the concept if it does. (Kelly [2001b], 403)

Thus, although Kelly objects to McDowell’s formulation of [Persistence] as being insufficiently clear, Kelly does suggest that there is a relevantly similar principle, [Re-Identification], governing demonstrative conceptual capacities that is plausible.

In order to motivate our support for [Re-Identification], Kelly introduces the following case, which I’ll call [Case 1]:

To pump up your intuitions, consider the following situation. [A] A subject is presented with two visual stimuli – a triangle and a square. In response to the examiner’s questions we find that the subject is able consistently to say that these are different shapes. The examiner asks, "Are these the same shape?" and the subject consistently answers, "No." Now imagine that the same subject is given a new task. [B] In this task the subject is presented with the same shape, a triangle, ten times in a row. Indeed, it is the very triangle that earlier was presented on the left. We discover, to our amazement, however, that in response to the examiner’s questions this time, the subject is unable consistently to classify this as the shape that was earlier presented on his left. Over the course of ten trials, in fact, 5 times the subject responds, "Yes, it’s the shape that was earlier presented on my left." and five times he responds, "No, it’s not the shape that was earlier presented on my left". Now, understand, I’m imagining a situation in which all the possible variables concerning perception are controlled for. The subject sees exactly the same thing ten times in a row, and 5 of those times he thinks it’s the same thing he saw before, while 5 of those times he thinks it’s not. (Kelly [2001b], 405-6; I’ve labeled the two steps within [Case 1] as [A] and [B] for the sake of convenient discussion.)
I read Kelly’s use of [Case 1] to be this: the fact that, in [1.B], the subject in question fails reliably to identify the shape on the left is conclusive evidence that, even in [1.A], the subject did not have a concept of the shape on the left. Thus, Kelly states, “I want to suggest that if we were confronted with such a subject we’d have no choice but to think that he does not know what that shape on the left, the triangle, is.” (Kelly [2001b], 406) That is, according to Kelly, [Case 1] involves the intuition that the subject does not have the concept of the triangular shape at any point—even at [1.A]. Thus, according to Kelly, [Case 1] supports [Re-Identification] because [Re-Identification] explains our intuition that the subject in [Case 1] does not possess the concept of the triangular shape.

Now the problem for McDowell’s attempt to use demonstrative concepts in order to explain the way in which perceptual experience is conceptually structured, as it were, all the way down, is, Kelly suggests, that we have intuitions that perceptual capacities, unlike demonstrative conceptual capacities, are not governed by [Re-Identification]. In order to motivate this intuition, Kelly introduces a case that I will refer to as [Case 2]:

Imagine a subject … presented with simultaneously given color samples…. . [A] In the first test we find that the subject is able consistently to distinguish two rather similar looking shades of green. That’s to say, in answer to the question, “Are these shades the same?” the subject consistently answers no, and is consistently right to do so. [B] In the second test, however, the subject is presented ten times in a row with one of those two color chips. Now, I claim that it is perfectly conceivable that the subject might not be able to re-identify this shade consistently. That’s to say, in response to the question, “Is this the color that was previously presented to you on your left?” the subject may answer five times yes and five times no. (Kelly [2001b], 411; I’ve labeled the two steps within [Case 2] as [A] and [B] for the sake of convenient discussion.)

Thus, Kelly suggests that [Case 2] does not involve the intuition that the subject has not perceived the different shades of green, despite the fact that we would still maintain, as in [Case 1], that the subject’s inability to re-identify the shade of green at [2.B] is conclusive evidence that the subject in question lacks a concept of that shade of green—even at [2.A]. Kelly underscores the thereby motivated distinction between perceptual and conceptual capacities by employing the notion of discrimination to denote the ability underwriting the former, whereas, as we have already seen, Kelly uses re-identification to denote the ability underwriting the latter. Kelly writes, “It’s perfectly conceivable, in other words, and there’s nothing about the
nature of perception to keep it from being true, that our capacity to discriminate colors exceeds our capacity to re-identify the colors discriminated.” (Kelly [2001b], 411) Thus, according to Kelly, [Case 2] motivates the idea that there is a divide between perception and conception in that, despite the fact that [Case 2] involves a failure of re-identification and thus, according to [Re-Identification], does not involve a conceptual capacity, [Case 2] is a case of perception.

5.

It would seem, however, that there are a number of difficulties with Kelly’s argument. First, there is the formulation of the thought experiments themselves. Though supposed to be thought experiments, they are described as if they were actual experiments conducted with human subjects. While these formulations certainly lend a strong air of plausibility to the scenarios, however, they simultaneously make those scenarios less well-suited to serve as clear tests of intuition. For both [Case 1] and [Case 2] are constructed in terms of using how a subject would respond to linguistic prompts as evidence for that subject’s conceptual or discriminatory capacities, in [Case 1] and [Case 2] respectively. Indeed, one might fault such formulations of the thought experiments to which Kelly appeals solely on the grounds that they invite the reader to confuse mere evidence for the possession of conceptual (in [Case 1]) or discriminatory (in [Case 2]) capacities with the fact of the possession of those capacities, thus threatening to swamp whatever intuitive sensitivity the reader might possess with factors extraneous to the central issue for which the thought experiments were adduced as evidence.

Thus, there is some reason to think that Kelly’s thought experiments illicitly attempt to appeal to intuitions that might otherwise remain silent, were the thought experiments more carefully stated. However—one might respond in defense of Kelly—the underlying thrust of the thought experiments remains in force. Whereas perceptual discrimination can conceivably be a purely episodic capacity, concept possession requires stability over time; that was the thrust of McDowell’s [Persistence] and Kelly’s reformulation of it, [Re-Identification]. Of course, this is why Kelly introduces his thought experiments in the first place—viz., to motivate acceptance of [Re-Identification] as a principle governing concept possession. In the remainder of this section and the next, we will deal with the question of this proposed disanalogy between discrimination and re-identification, as supported by Kelly’s thought experiments.

Given the discussion so far, it would seem that, though there may be some reason to suggest that Kelly’s arguments fail to tell decisively against the possibility of
demonstrative concepts, there nevertheless seems to be some room for hope for opponents of demonstrative concepts that the core of Kelly’s objection remains untouched. There is a further difficulty, however, with Kelly’s argument from the thought experiments he adduces.

To see this, recall that the only interpretation in which [Case 1] is a case in which the subject lacks the concept of the specific triangular shape is the reading in which [1.B] is understood as conclusive evidence that the subject could not in fact distinguish the two shapes in [1.A]. Without this stipulation, [Case 1] does not rule out that, at the time of [1.A], the subject did possess the concept of the specific triangular shape, but merely lost that concept by the time of [1.B].

If this is correct, however, there is no longer a disanalogy of perception and conception in [Case 2]. The point of Kelly’s argument that [Case 2] doesn’t rule out the subject’s having perceived the shade of green is precisely that, without the stipulation that [2.B] is veridical evidence for the subject’s not having perceived the shade of green in [2.A], we cannot—as Kelly correctly notes—rule out that the subject perceived the shade in [2.A] but then was unable to do so in [2.B]. Without some motivation for the idea that we should not employ this reading for the analogous case of conception (i.e., re-identification) in [Case 2], however, there is no reason to suppose that [Case 2] motivates the idea that perception and conception come apart.

Another way to put this point is as follows. Recall that Kelly needs to motivate the idea that demonstrative conceptual thought is, whereas perception is not, subject to [Re-Identification], and, thus, the subject in the above case may be understood to perceive the shade of green despite the fact that he is unable to possess a demonstrative concept of that shade. Kelly signals this distinction between perception and the possession of demonstrative concepts, in the above argument, by stating that “i[t]’s perfectly conceivable, in other words, and there’s nothing about the nature of perception to keep it from being true, that our capacity to discriminate colors exceeds our capacity to re-identify the colors discriminated.” (Kelly [2002], 411; boldface mine) Thus, Kelly’s distinction between perception and demonstrative concept possession relies on a distinction between discrimination and re-identification; whereas perception involves the former, demonstrative concept possession involves the latter.

This distinction between discrimination and re-identification as it is employed in Kelly’s argument, however, is suspect without some prior motivation for distinguishing between experiential and conceptual capacities. Certainly, it ought to be obvious that the possession of discriminatory capacities is a necessary condition for the possession of conceptual capacities. (Cf. Sosa [1993]) What is needed is an
argument to support the claim that the possession of conceptual capacities is not a necessary condition for the possession of discriminatory capacities. This, however, is where Kelly’s argument is supposed to come in—we can conceive of a case in which one is able to perceive, despite the fact that, an instant later, that person is unable to distinguish that which was perceived from other perceptibles. Does this mean that, in order to appeal to demonstrative concepts as a way of upholding the necessary connection between concept possession and discrimination in perception, we must maintain that [Re-Identification], as stated, is not a principle governing demonstrative concept possession? Not exactly; in fact, it means that Kelly’s argument against the idea that one would possess the demonstrative concept of the shade of green in the above case rests on a subtle equivocation concerning the meaning of “re-identification” in Kelly’s formulation of the principle.

We may bring out this equivocation by comparing McDowell’s principle [Persistence] with Kelly’s [Re-Identification]. Whereas [Persistence] can only be read as involving a diachronic capacity—i.e., a capacity that can in principle persist over time, [Re-Identification] can be read either as involving a diachronic or a synchronic capacity—i.e., a capacity possessed at a particular time. Understood synchronically, re-identification involves, sensu strictu, consistent re-application at a particular time; understanding “re-identification” diachronically allows us to read [Re-Identification] as [Persistence]. However, Kelly is correct to suggest that, read as [Persistence], [Re-Identification] is implausible. It is only when “re-identification” is interpreted synchronically—as consistent re-application—that [Re-Identification] is a plausible constraint on demonstrative concept possession.

If this is the case, however, Kelly’s argument loses its force. The argument for a distinction between perception and demonstrative concept possession relied on reading the constraint on perception—i.e., the constraint involving discrimination—synchronously, while reading the constraint on demonstrative concept possession—i.e., the constraint involving re-identification—diachronically. Once one recognizes this unmotivated imbalance in the readings of “discrimination” and “re-identification”, one sees that Kelly’s argument illicitly imputed a distinction between perception and demonstrative concept possession where none need exist. Rejecting [Persistence]—and the diachronic reading of [Re-Identification]—allows us to understand demonstrative concept possession as conceptual without thereby opening up a gulf between perceptual experience and demonstrative concept possession.

6.

The expression “synchronic re-identification” is, of course, a term of art.
Indeed, some might question its felicity, given that re-identification might seem to require a sustained conceptual capacity over time. This would be too quick, however. For consider a case in which one takes in a complicated scene and notices—at one and the same time—that a certain visual motif reappears at widely disparate sections of that scene. This would be a case in which one re-identifies, at one and the same time, a visual motif in two disparate regions of the scene. Or compare a case in which one recognizes the same sound in both the left and right headphones while listening to a piece of music; one would then plausibly be said to re-identify the sound from the left headphone in the right headphone (or vice versa).

To further motivate our use of the term “re-identification,” consider the palette of grey-scale patches in Figure 1:

![Figure 1](image)

Many readers will be able to take in all of the patches in Figure 1 at one time and, in so doing, recognize that the patches labeled c and j have the same intensity of grey-scale. This is the sort of case that is intended by the notion of synchronic re-identification: sensitivity, at one instant in time, to multiple appearances of phenomena captured one’s perceptual experience.

Note furthermore that this sort of synchronic re-identification can be captured in terms of the deployment of demonstrative concepts on the part of the viewer: “that shade,” one might say, either while explicitly pointing or simply mentally ostending, “is the same shade as that one.”

Indeed, this case also allows us to see that synchronic and diachronic re-identification may indeed come apart. Without looking at Figure 1, consider Figure 2, below. Though many readers will have been able to have re-identified the intensity of grey-scale in patches c and j in Figure 1, many fewer readers will be able to identify which of the patches in Figure 2 corresponds to the intensity of grey-scale in patches c and j in Figure 1. Note furthermore that this inability of readers diachronically to re-identify that shade of grey has no bearing upon the ability of those readers, while considering Figure 1, to deploy demonstrative concepts in their comparisons of c and j to each other or to other grey-scale patches.
If the conclusions suggested by a consideration of Figures 1 and 2 are correct, then, we have seen that both synchronic re-identification and the deployment of episodic demonstrative concepts in such cases of synchronic re-identification are possible. Given this, however, Kelly’s argument fails against McDowell’s deployment of demonstrative concepts to account for both the fineness of grain of perceptual experience and the possibility that such experience could be conceptually structured.

7.

McDowell thought that he had to accept [Persistence] in order to avoid having to conceive of the demonstrative concept “this shade” only in the attenuated sense of “Wittgenstein’s case of the person who says ‘I know how tall I am’, putting his hand on top of his head to prove it.” (McDowell [1996a], 57) However, it would seem that McDowell would have had enough conceptual resources at his disposal to rule out this attenuated sense without needing to turn to [Persistence].

Thus, McDowell follows Evans in accepting that thought are governed by the Generality Constraint. According to Evans’ formulation, if a system of thoughts is to be structured, i.e., if one is to be able to think of objects (a, b, c, …) and properties (F, G, H, …) by means of the system, then the system must conform to the GENERALITY CONSTRAINT:

If a subject is to be able to have the thought that a is F, then she must be able to grasp the thoughts, for every object (a, b, c, …) and every property (being F, being G, being H, …) of which she has Ideas or concepts, (i) that b is F, c is F, …, and (ii) that a is G, a is H, ….11

That is, the Constraint stipulates that if I am to have a thought that the a is F, it must be possible for me to have the thoughts that the b is F, that the c is F, etc., for all thoughts of objects a, b, c, … that I can grasp. This means, however, that we can rule out the Wittgensteinian case in which I use the measure “this tall”, holding my open hand on the top of my head, as a case of demonstrative concept possession due to the fact that the measure “this tall” is, in the case under consideration, not re-applicable as required by the Generality Constraint.12

Indeed, it is not merely plausible that the constraints on conceptual capacities are compatible with the rejection of diachronic constraints like [Persistence]. As M.G.F. Martin has recently noted we may contrast standing capacities to think about a—even in a case in which a is absent—with episodic conceptual capacities, abilities
to think about “a particular object or event just given the circumstances present in the particular situation.” (Martin [2002], 179) If this is the case, however, then McDowell’s adoption of [Persistence]—and Kelly’s argument for the diachronic reading of [Re-Identification]—are both results of failures to recognize the possibility of such episodic capacities. That such capacities are fully conceptual should be clear, however—particularly when one recognizes that we may conceive of episodic conceptual capacities as involving standing, object-independent capacities, the capacities to acquire one-off capacities to think about objects or properties when suitably situated in a given context. (Cf. Martin [2002], 179)

Surprisingly, perhaps, McDowell seems to make precisely this point in his discussion of demonstrative concepts. Recall that we introduced the notion of demonstrative concepts by quoting McDowell as suggesting that, “one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like 'that shade', in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of the sample.” (McDowell [1996a], 56-7) This suggests at least the possibility of an episodic understanding of the capacity, one that requires the presence of the sample in the context of application.

Furthermore, McDowell notes that “the capacity to have that particular shade in mind is a standing one, which requires no more than possession of the concept of a shade together with the subject’s standing powers of discrimination. Experience raises this standing potential to a degree of actuality; the capacity to have that shade in mind as that shade is actually operative in the experience … .” (McDowell [1996a], 59, fn. 16) Note that the description of the conceptual capacity involved here as consisting simply of the subject’s powers of discrimination—plus the possession of the general concept of a shade—provides further evidence for the rejection of Kelly’s attempt to drive a wedge between perception and demonstrative concept possession by exploiting a putative distinction between discrimination and re-identification, understood synchronically.

Indeed, there is a demonstration available, by means of a priori argument, that there must indeed be conceptual capacities that have this episodic structure. Consider once more the Generality Constraint. Though some have questioned whether the comporting with the Generality Constraint is plausible as a necessary condition, nevertheless, as Toribio [2007] notes, “meeting the Generality Constraint is widely regarded as a sufficient condition for conceptual content.” (Toribio [2007], 446) However, as should be clear from the Generality Constraint, conforming with [Persistence] is not a necessary condition for satisfying the Generality Constraint. Indeed, Kelly himself mentions the Generality Constraint to note that it does not entail [Persistence]. (Cf. Kelly [2001b], 405) Given this, however, [Persistence] in
fact cannot be a necessary condition for demonstrative concept possession.

Note also that this result is precisely the one that we saw with respect to our consideration of the two sequences of grey-scale patches in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Though a reader’s capacities might have failed to satisfy [Persistence], in that the reader might fail to be able to re-identify, diachronically, the intensity of grey-scale patch from Figure 1 to Figure 2, that same reader, as long as they are able synchronically to re-identify the intensity of grey-scale in patches c and f of Figure 1, would satisfy the Generality Constraint. For, as we saw in our discussion of the previous section, such a reader would be able to entertain thoughts such as, “That shade of grey is the same as that one,” or “That shade of grey would look great in a piece of cloth,” etc. Given this, however, our a priori argument in this section and our consideration of the grey-scale experiment in the previous one mutually reinforce the conclusion that Kelly’s argument against McDowell does not succeed.

8.

As noted at the outset, the argument presented here is limited in scope. We have not mounted an exhaustive defense of conceptualism; indeed, many further reasons for being skeptical of the conceptualist position remain open to those who find conceptualism implausible. If our discussion here has been successful, however, we have provided reason to think that one should not be so quick to dismiss conceptualism simply on the basis of considerations of the fineness of grain of perceptual experience. Indeed, if our arguments here are correct, the appeal to the notion of demonstrative concepts provides conceptualists with a powerful tool with which to defend their position.13

Sources:
Dummett: Contributions to Philosophy. (Dordrecht: Nijhoff), 59-80.


Endnotes:

1 Note that the issue must be stated in terms of the way content is presented or structured in experience or judgment, rather than in terms of the content presented. For, as Stalnaker [1998] has convincingly argued, if one attempts to consider the question of the gap between the conceptual and the non-conceptual in terms of the content of perceptions or judgments, there can be no issue: in terms of the informational content conveyed—however this content is understood—there is only nonconceptual content.


3 Cf., e.g., Dretske’s claim in his [1981] that conceptual structure is digital, while nonconceptually structured perception is analogue.

4 Thus, Evans [1982] has claimed that one can visually perceive more shapes than one can recognize and discriminate more color shades than one can name.

5 E.g., in Kelly [2001a].

6 Similarly, Kelly has argued that concepts cannot be the constituents of perceptual experience because “they figure in expressions that we can entertain in propositional attitude contexts, they are constituents of propositions that stand in inferential relations to one another, and so on (picking your favorite characterization of the semantic features of language or thought). This said, we might ask why anyone should be motivated to hold the view that perceptual content is characterized by something conceptual in the first place. There certainly doesn’t seem to be any obvious phenomenological reason to hold such a view. Indeed, those philosophers motivated by the phenomenology of perception clearly reject this idea. They typically think that the content of experience is in some way richer, more complicated, or more fine-grained than the content of thought, and therefore that perception ought not to be characterized in terms of the elements of thought at all.” (Kelly [2001b], 401)

7 Although, it should be noted, McDowell does not there refer to such concepts as “demonstrative concepts.”

8 Cf. the account of perceptual demonstrative identification in Evans [1982], 145-51.

9 Note that, if my interpretation of the discussion here is correct, all that McDowell needs to establish in the present dialectical context is the possibility of
demonstrative concepts. If demonstrative concepts are possible, there is no reason why one ought not appeal to such concepts in one’s attempt to make sense of the nature of perceptual content. Thus, Kelly is mistaken when, in discussing McDowell’s version of the conceptualist motivation for understanding perceptual experience as conceptually structured that I introduce in section 1 of this paper, he argues that McDowell “needs to argue not only that perceptual content is conceptual, but further that perceptual content must be conceptual (at least if we have beliefs with empirical content at all).” (Kelly [2001b], 402) Kelly’s mistake here is the result of a simple scope confusion regarding the necessity of the conclusion of McDowell’s argument, “Perceptual content must be conceptual, if we are to have beliefs with empirical content at all.” The point at issue, in other words, is whether, given the datum that perceptual experience is so finely grained, we cannot conceive of perceptual experience as being conceptually structured.

10 Of course, depending on how one wished to press the import of the “can in principle” locution in McDowell’s formulation of [Persistence], one might note that it is perfectly consistent with [Persistence] that a particular experience involve the employment of a conceptual capacity that in actuality exists no longer than the experience itself. However, it seems possible to read Kelly’s thought-experiments as involving cases in which the subjects cannot in principle re-identify over time. Of course, this might make those thought experiments even less plausible than they already are. For a discussion of other issues having a negative impact on the plausibility of Kelly’s thought experiments, see section 5 below.


12 Indeed, to the extent that the measure “this tall” is applicable—say, if I am able to use the measure to say that a certain tree is so-and-so-many “this tall”, etc.—we will fail to understand the Wittgensteinian example as presenting a challenge to our understanding that measure as a useful one.

13 Indeed, though Roskies [2008], in an original and provocative argument, suggests that conceptualism has no way to account for the acquisition of novel concepts, there is some reason for thinking that here, as well, demonstrative concepts might be of use in offering a line of defense to the conceptualist.