

## A Case against Conceptualism about Perceptual Content: First Perception <sup>†</sup>

### [Algısal İçerik Kavramsalcılığına Karşı Bir Durum: İlk Algı]

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**Abstract:** There are two major philosophical positions about the nature of representational content of perception; conceptualism and nonconceptualism. According to conceptualism, perceptual content is wholly conceptual, therefore, in order to be in a contentful perceptual state, a subject needs to possess all concepts that characterize the content of the experience. Nonconceptualism, on the other hand, is the view that perceptual content is nonconceptual, and that possessing relevant concepts is not necessarily required for having a perceptual experience. In this study, an argument against the conceptualist thesis will be proposed. The argument will be based on “the Molyneux problem,” and will present a more radical version of the problem in order to illustrate the possibility of nonconceptual perception.

**Keywords:** perception, perceptual content, conceptual, conceptualism, Molyneux.

Many philosophers claim that perception has representational content, that is, that perception represents the world to be in a certain way. For example, the visual perception of a tomato represents it as being red, or the perception through the sense of taste of a lemon represents it as being sour. However, the agreement on the

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representational character of perceptual content does not guarantee an agreement on the nature of this content. Conceptualism holds that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual thoroughly, therefore, a subject who is in a contentful perceptual state needs to possess all the relevant concepts that characterize the content of her (his) perception. This means that you cannot experience that a tomato is red without possessing the concept “red.” The concept is the constituent of your perception (McDowell, 1996; Brewer, 1999). Nonconceptualism, on the other hand, holds that a subject can be in a perceptual state with a certain content, even though (s)he does not possess all concepts that are necessary to characterize the content in question. According to nonconceptualism, it is perfectly possible to experience a tomato as red, even if you do not have the concept “red,” therefore, the content of perception is nonconceptual (Evans, 1982; Dretske, 1969; Bermudez, 2000; Peacocke, 1998; Tye, 2005).

The main motivation of conceptualism is epistemological. Conceptualists like John McDowell hold that admitting the conceptuality of perceptual content is necessary if one believes that perception has rational bearing on thought and beliefs. Contrary to some coherentist approaches that attribute merely causal role to perceptual states in the formation of empirical beliefs, McDowell claims that perceptual states can justify beliefs. For McDowell, without attributing a justificatory role to perceptual states, we cannot explain how the external world constraints the content of our empirical beliefs. However, justifying beliefs, according to McDowell, requires conceptuality because a nonconceptualized item is a bare presence or “extra-conceptual Given” that cannot enter any rational relations to beliefs. In short according to McDowell, nothing can justify unless it is conceptual (McDowell, 1996: 4-9). On the other hand, nonconceptualists stress the implausibility of the claim that one needs to possess all concepts that characterize everything that figures in the content of one’s perception by introducing several counter-arguments. For them, it seems counter-intuitive to claim that one cannot perceive a hexagonal object if one does not possess the concept “hexagon.” However, by denying the conceptuality of perceptual content, nonconceptualism does not intend to deny the epistemological significance of perceptual state as well. Most conceptualists rather claim that in order to rationally ground empirical beliefs, the content of perception does not have to be conceptual. The aim of this paper is to give a nonconceptualist argument to show the implausibility of the conceptualist claim. The argument will consist of a thought experiment inspired by the famous Molyneux problem. It will be claimed that in order to account for “first

perception"<sup>1</sup> or the first encounter of objects, we need to ascribe nonconceptual content to perceptual experiences.

We are creatures endowed with concepts, beliefs and ideas. From the beginning of our lives, we learn to interpret what we perceive, to shape it through the concepts we possess. And once we learn that, we cannot isolate ourselves from concepts we possess and look around with *naked eyes*. No matter how much we concentrate and try to clear our minds from any kind of prejudice, expectation, beliefs or desires, we cannot make ourselves perceive things at least without seeing them as "something;" without subsuming them under a concept. If it were possible to erase all concepts and beliefs, we have, even for a very brief moment, we could then have a clear case of an experience devoid of all conceptual constraint. The fact that concepts are so fundamental in mapping out the way we interpret the world and ourselves may lead to the mistaken belief that perception is necessarily conceptual. The fact that our perceptions are usually (or almost always) accompanied by concepts or interpreted through them does not show that those concepts are constitutive of perceptual content, nor does it show that there is a logical entailment between them. In other words, the fact that when having a perceptual experience of a table we inevitably see or interpret it as a "table" (if we possess the concept "table"), does not show that the concept "table" is constitutive of our experience of a table. Just like hearing a sentence in a certain language is not logically dependent upon understanding that language, perception is not logically dependent upon concepts. If we know the language, we cannot help also understand it, but it is still logically possible to hear the sentence without grasping its meaning. Therefore, in order to refute conceptualism, we do not have to show how perception remains pure even when concepts are present (though it can remain pure). For instance, we do not have to show how a subject who possesses the concept "table" can nevertheless have a perceptual experience of a table without conceptualizing it as a table. Rather it would be sufficient to conceive a case where perception is present even in the absence of any conceptual capacities that would enable the subject to conceptualize what (s)he perceives. Conceptualism would be refuted if perception without any concepts can be coherently established.<sup>2</sup> I will therefore attempt to provide such an illustration based upon "the Molyneux problem" introduced by William Molyneux through a letter he sent to John Locke. Though the original problem too can be interpreted as constituting an important challenge to conceptualism, I believe that a

<sup>1</sup> I borrowed the term "first perception" from Gallagher (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Here I am assuming and supporting the "autonomy thesis" introduced by Peacocke. According to this thesis it is possible that a creature is in states with nonconceptual content even though that creature does not possess any concepts at all. See, Peacocke (1999).

more radical version of it will be more effective against the conceptualist claim that all perception is conceptual.

In a letter sent to Locke, Molyneux states the problem as follows:

Suppose a man born blind, and now adult, and thought by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and the other, which is the cube, which the sphere. Suppose then the cube and the sphere placed on a table, and the blind man to be made to see; *quaere*, whether by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe, which the cube? (Locke, 1998: 88, 89).

The problem is actually considered to be about the relation between different perceptual modalities, about whether an object of one sense modality can be recognized through the concepts acquired through the perception by another sense modality. My intention is however, to focus on the *firstness* of the experience the blind man gains, a kind of visual perception that occurs before one has acquired any visual concepts about what he perceives. I believe that the first visual experience of Molyneux's man is a good candidate to be an instance of nonconceptual perception if it can be shown that the man does not possess at least some concepts that are necessary to give a full definition of what he perceives.<sup>3</sup>

Is it still possible, as the conceptualists would claim to hold that the Molyneux's man's first visual perception is conceptual? To answer this question, we should first establish that the man in question would have a genuine perceptual experience as soon as he gains his vision. As can be seen from Molyneux's letter, the problem in as sense presupposes that the man does actually have a perceptual experience. For, the problem is not about whether the man will perceive the shape properties of objects, but rather about whether he will be able to tell them apart. That is, about whether he will be able to interpret or identify what he visually perceives on the basis of his tactile concepts. Nor is it about whether the surgery that enables him to see is successful enough to provide him total vision. In the above quote, the possibility that the man's sight is not good enough to count as perception is not even considered. Therefore, it can be assumed that Molyneux's man actually sees objects and that the objects will be presented to him in a certain way, though the subject is unable to interpret his perception.

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<sup>3</sup> The Molyneux problem should not be considered merely as a thought experiment, because there exist actual empirical instances of it. For example, William Cheselden, a surgeon, actually restored the sight of a young boy who was born blind. For more information see Cheselden (1728).

A possible reaction that can be seen as favoring conceptualism is to give an affirmative answer to the question on the basis of the sameness of visual and tactile shape concepts. Some philosophers, including Evans<sup>4</sup>, argue that a shape concept acquired through one perceptual modality is the same as the concept of the same shape acquired through another perceptual modality. Given that Molyneux's man already possesses concepts "cube" and "sphere" that he has gained through tactile experience, he can have a visual perceptual experience whose content is conceptual. In other words, he can experience those objects as a cube and as a sphere. Considered from this perspective the problem does not seem to threaten conceptualism.

Some other philosophers, on the other hand, give a negative answer to Molyneux's question. For them, the Molyneux's man cannot tell which object is the cube and which one is the sphere on the basis of perception alone. For, contrary to the common idea that we have "concepts that we apply indifferently on the basis of sight and touch," (Campbell, 2005: 195) different sense modalities provide different concepts of the same property. For instance, Berkeley argues that the Molyneux's man cannot identify what he visually perceives because his visual concepts and tactile concepts of shapes are not the same concepts. As he states: "The extension, figures, and motions perceived by sight are specifically distinct from the ideas of touch called the same names, nor is there any such thing as one idea or kind of idea common to both senses." (Berkeley, 2008: 72) So, according to him, all properties are proper sensibles; they are peculiar to one perceptual modality. That is to say, a visual concept can only be gained by visual perception. Therefore, if Berkeley is correct, the blind-born man who gains his sight and visually perceives objects for the first time cannot be said to have an experience with a conceptual content that is characterized by visual shape concepts "cube" and "sphere." For, he does not possess those *visual perceptual concepts* that are necessary to define the content of his experience. Even though he already possesses some tactile shape concepts, these concepts would be different from concepts acquired via visual perception, and hence cannot account for what he visually perceives.

Even though it is commonly accepted that shape properties are common sensibles, i.e. properties that can be perceived through more than one sense, it can be argued against conceptualism on the basis of color perception. Colors are proper sensibles; they can only be perceived through vision. So, even if it is claimed that shape concepts acquired via different sense modalities are nevertheless identical, the same cannot be held for color concepts. For, if a person lacks the sense through which he can perceive a relevant proper sensible, he cannot acquire the perceptual concept of that quality through other

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<sup>4</sup> Evans argues for the commonality between vision and touch in terms of 'egocentric space'. However, he does not take this to be in favor of conceptualism. For more details, see Evans (1985).

senses. So, Molyneux's man will not have any perceptual concept of colors that he perceives for the first time in his life time. Even if the Molyneux man may conceptualize his visual experience of a cube and sphere as "cube" and "sphere," this conceptualization will not exhaust the content of his experience, for the shape of objects are not the only properties presented in experience. A visual experience also presents color properties. This means that there will be at least some concepts that are needed to specify perceptual content which a person can lack. If this is so, conceptualism cannot be correct: it cannot be the case that a person who perceives an object necessarily possesses all of the concepts of the details presented to him. The Molyneux man will have a contentful visual experience for the first time but will lack some concepts that define the content of his experience.

It is always possible for conceptualists to come up with a way to account for perceptual content on the basis of some demonstrative concepts, or other concepts already possessed by the subject. Through I do not think that these are plausible options, it is at least in principle possible to find out convenient concepts already present in the subject's conceptual repertoire which the content of perception can be mold into. Molyneux's man is an adult human being. Contrary to the case of pre-conceptual infants and animals, we are at least certain that he has perceptual concepts, beliefs, thoughts and other kinds of conceptual capacities. Even though he is not able to conceptualize what he visually perceives like a sighted person does, he can nevertheless conceptualize it in some way. Suppose that Molyneux's man not only lacks color concepts but also *visual shape concepts* as well. Undoubtedly, the man will not be able to classify what he visually perceives as a sphere and as a cube, or as red and as green. But nevertheless, we can think of some other concepts through which he can conceptualize what he sees. For instance, when he first visually encounters a sphere-shaped object and a cube-shaped object, he can at least recognize them as *distinct objects that have different properties*. Given that he has had past experiences (even though not visual ones), we can at least admit that he possesses concepts like "object" or "thing," and "property" and be able to form demonstrative concepts like "this object," "this thing," or "this property." I do not think that such concepts are capable of capturing every detail of perceptual content and that conceptualism can be rescued by this method. Nevertheless, it is still a possible option for conceptualism to claim that a subject perceives only to the extent that his conceptual repertoire permits.

Therefore, if we can modify the Molyneux Problem in order to show that there can be perception when the subject does not possess even a single perceptual concept, the argument will be much more effective. We can dramatize the Molyneux case to such an extent that we can imagine a man who possesses no perceptual concept and beliefs at all. Let me name such a scenario "the radical Molyneux case." A man who has always

lacked not only his sight but also all of his sense modalities can have no conscious perceptual experience, and hence can acquire no perceptual concepts. Imagine an unfortunate human who was born in comatose state and who has hitherto spent all his life without enjoying a single perceptual experience. Nevertheless, physicians have ensured that his bodily organs were growing and getting mature like those of a normal human being. Under the supervision of physicians, the man becomes an adult human being and one day he wakes up from his coma and starts to perceive his environment. He starts to hear noises, smell odors and see things.<sup>5</sup> The first experience of this human being can be characterized as “perception in its very instance, without the contribution of previous sense experience, without being informed by established conceptual schemas, without the influence of habit, custom, language and so forth.” (Gallagher, 1996) And this kind of perception I believe can be a clear instance of nonconceptual perception. Certainly, the *first experience* we are talking about here will not be very similar to the experience of a normal adult being. The man in question is not in a position to interpret, categorize or identify what he sees. He may not be able to form a meaningful whole from the various experiences he has at the moment of awakening. It is also possible that he is not able to perceive things with acuity, for he is sensing the world through organs that did not function for years. But it is not (logically) implausible to suppose that he has perceptual experiences nevertheless. He sees, for instance, his parents and doctors, but has no idea about who they are- even worse, about what they are. If it is guaranteed that all of his sense organs and his body in general are in healthy condition, then we have no reason to doubt that he is having contentful perceptual experiences. For, from the movement of his eyeball, and from the reaction of his body, it would be possible to tell that he perceives things. And as time goes by and he is acclimated to the world of sensory experience, he can eventually recount for us what it was like to awaken from the sensory coma he had had.

The kind of first perception described above is usually discussed among philosophers within the framework of infant perception. The first perception of an infant human is in a way similar, presumably, to the radical Molyneux case. The radical Molyneux case, however, has one advantage over the newly born infant case. It is known that a newborn baby’s vision and other sense organs are not as mature as those of an adult human. For instance, its retina may not be sufficiently developed for performing its function, for the size of a newborn infant’s eye is almost half the size of an adult’s eye. Therefore, it seems more difficult to conceive what it would be like to perceive the

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<sup>5</sup> This thought experiment can be seen as a version of the thought experiment introduced by Condillac in 1746. Condillac wants us to consider a statue of a human that acquires one of its sense in isolation of other senses. Condillac used this thought experiment in order to show that all knowledge is based upon sensations. See Falkenstein (2010).

world *through a newborn infant's eyes*. In that sense, the radical Molyneux man can be seen like a *newborn adult*. And its being an adult makes it more probable that he will have perceptual experiences more similar to ours. However, newborn infants are real cases that can provide us with empirical data about first perception devoid of all concepts and interpretation. If we can understand what a newborn infant is able to perceive, we can understand what basic perception with nonconceptual content would be like, and partially what kind of experiences the radical Molyneux man will undergo. Therefore, I believe that studies about newborn infants' perception can shed light on the radical Molyneux problem and to nonconceptual first perception.

In his *The Principles of Psychology*, William James states that babies' first perception is a "blooming, buzzing confusion," (James, 1890: 462) and not anything like adults' perceptual experiences. Hence, conceptualism might argue against nonconceptualism by saying that infant perception, the radical Molyneux man's perception or any other kind of nonconceptual perception posited by the nonconceptualist does not in fact count as genuine perception at all. It might be objected that an uncategorized mass of sensations cannot *represent* the world, and hence cannot have any cognitive relevance.

However, empirical studies show that newborn infants are capable of seeing and hearing the world around them, despite the fact that their perceptions have less acuity than an adult human being's. For instance, it has been shown that newborn babies' perception is not quite as James describes them; rather, babies are capable of discriminating between different stimuli and capable of visually representing the world as "a world composed of determinate and bounded individuals behaving in reasonably fixed and determinate manners." (Bermúdez, 2000: 67). The developmental psychologist Robert L. Frantz noticed that newborn infants are capable of exhibiting preferences among stimuli. A newborn infant may stare longer at one source of the stimuli than another –at patterned images rather than uniform ones presented side by side, for example. He, therefore, concluded that "visually inexperienced infants had at least a rudimentary capacity to detect and discriminate forms." (Banks and Ginsburg, 1985: 208) Newborn infant visual ability is not restricted to merely visual discrimination. It is also claimed that newborn infants are capable of object individuation by spatiotemporal means. One research concludes "if spatiotemporal discontinuity is detected, young infants establish representations of two numerically distinct objects." (Carey and Xu, 2001: 185) That is to say, infants have a nonconceptual mechanism through which they can establish representations of single objects and distinct objects based upon the spatiotemporal information they receive from objects. So, it can be said that young infants can "parse the visual array in a way that maps (more or less) the boundaries between objects even, though they have no conceptual grasp of what those objects are, or of what an object in general is." (Bermúdez, 2003:



191) Moreover, it has also been shown that they are able to track objects (Pylyshyn, 2007). It seems plausible to suppose that the radical Molyneux man will exhibit at least the same visual ability as a baby is able to exhibit. When his senses are first opened to the “layout of reality,” he will immediately start getting information from them. Even though he will not be able to articulate what he perceives and recognize it even as “something” or subsume it under any kind of concepts, he will nevertheless have a contentful experience of the world. His experience might be more determinate than a baby’s experience and is obviously less determinate than a normal adult human being’s. From the empirical findings about the fact that newborns can have contentful perceptual experience, we can also derive the conclusion that a man who gains all of his senses at ones will also have contentful experiences from the very first moment.

The radical Molyneux case or infant perception highlights the possibility that perception does not require the possession or mastery of concepts or conceptual capacities. Even though our conceptual repertoires effect the way we interpret and comprehend the world around us, it does not follow that concepts are constitutive parts of perceptual content. Perceiving a red tomato does not require the possession of the concept “red,” even though interpreting it as “a red tomato” requires. Therefore, in order to leave room for a nonconceptualist understanding of perceptual content, we need to recognize the difference between merely experiencing what the world is like and conceptualizing what we are experiencing through our conceptual means.

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**Öz:** Algının temsil edici içeriği hakkında iki temel felsefi duruş vardır; kavramsalcılık ve kavram-dışsalcılık. Kavramsalcılığa göre, algısal içerik tamamen kavramsaldır bu nedenle içerikli bir algı deneyimine sahip olabilmek için öznenin algı içeriğini tanımlayan tüm kavramlara sahip olması gerekir. Öte yandan kavram-dışsalcılık, algısal içeriğin kavramsal olmadığı ve algısal deneyim için kavramlara sahip olmanın gerekli olmadığı görüşüdür. Bu çalışmada kavramsalcı teze karşı bir argüman sunulacaktır. Argüman “Molyneux problemine” dayanmakta ve bu problemin daha radikal bir versiyonunu sunarak kavramsal olmayan algıyı örneklemeyi hedeflemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** algı, algısal içerik, kavramsal, kavramsalcılık, Molyneux.