

# Conceptualism and The (Supposed) Non-Transitivity of Colour Indiscriminability

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## Abstract

In the philosophy of perception, the conceptualist asserts, and the non-conceptualist denies, that the representational content of experience is exclusively conceptual content. In this paper, I show that Delia Graff's recent arguments for the traditionally unpopular view that colour indiscriminability is transitive have important implications for the conceptualism versus non-conceptualism debate.

This is because (1) conceptualism can be true only if we possess context-dependent demonstrative colour concepts, and (2) only if colour indiscriminability is transitive can we possess such concepts.

This paper addresses (2). In order to establish its truth, I consider two accounts of demonstrative colour concept possession, those given by the two most prominent conceptualists, John McDowell and Bill Brewer. McDowell and Brewer each propose a condition that a subject must satisfy in order to possess a demonstrative colour concept. In the bulk of the paper, I am concerned to establish two things: first, that unless colour indiscriminability is transitive, neither of the conceptualists' proposed conditions are satisfiable; and second, that at least one of these conditions must indeed be satisfied by any genuine demonstrative colour concept possessor.

## 1. Introduction

Delia Graff has recently argued – effectively, I think – for the traditionally unpopular view that colour indiscriminability is transitive.<sup>1</sup> My aim in this paper is not, however, to defend or even to discuss Graff's arguments, but rather to investigate their implications for an issue in the philosophy of perception that has generated considerable debate in recent years.

The debate is between the *conceptualists* – such as John McDowell and Bill Brewer – and the *non-conceptualists* – such as Christopher Peacocke and the late Gareth Evans. After explaining briefly what these opposing positions amount to, I will show that there are good reasons for the conceptualists to accept Graff's view that colour indiscriminability is transitive.

## 2. Conceptualism and Non-Conceptualism

*Conceptualism* is the view that the representational content of (normal human adult) perceptual experience is exclusively conceptual content. *Non-*

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<sup>1</sup> In her 2001. Graff's arguments extend also to other forms of indiscriminability. I will focus on the issue of colour indiscriminability in order to simplify the discussion.

*conceptualism* is the view that the representational content of perceptual experience is at least partly non-conceptual content.

As I use the terms 'conceptual content' and 'non-conceptual content', insofar as the content of a subject's experience is conceptual, the experience has the content it does in virtue of its drawing into operation concepts that the subject himself possesses at the time of the experience; insofar as the content of a subject's experience is non-conceptual, by contrast, the experience has the content it does in virtue of something else – *not* in virtue of its drawing into operation concepts that the subject possesses at the time of the experience.

### 3. Conceptualism and Fineness of Grain

An immediate consequence of the conceptualist view is that we must have concepts for all the various objects, properties, and relations which feature in our experiences. A traditional worry here is that it seems unlikely, initially at any rate, that we have a concept for every colour shade (say) that features in our experience when we are looking at a spectrum. It seems tempting to say that in such a situation, our colour concepts are not as *fine-grained* as the shades that feature in our experience.<sup>2</sup>

However, the conceptualists insist that this worry rests on the mistaken assumption that we can possess only those context-independent concepts expressible by such general words as 'red', 'green', or 'terracotta'. According to the conceptualists, such an assumption overlooks the possibility that while one is enjoying an experience in which a *particular* colour shade features, one can express a concept of exactly this shade by using a phrase which includes a demonstrative.<sup>3</sup> This response, the conceptualists contend, is sufficient to undermine the worry that stems from the issue of fineness of grain since it seems that one could have such a demonstrative concept for any shade, or any other property or relation, which could conceivably feature in an experience.

### 4. Demonstrative Concepts and Recognitional Capacities

But the conceptualist, as McDowell himself notes, must ensure that our supposed demonstrative concepts really are bona fide concepts.<sup>4</sup> McDowell draws our attention to Wittgenstein's case in which a subject proclaims 'I know how tall I am!' and lays his hand on top of his head to prove it.<sup>5</sup> McDowell agrees that such a subject would lack a genuine demonstrative concept of his own height. But given this, what exactly *is* required for a subject to possess a demonstrative concept of a particular height (or a particular shade, etc.)? McDowell's suggestion is that:

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Evans, 1982, p. 229, and Heck, 2000, pp. 489-90.

<sup>3</sup> See McDowell, 1994, pp. 56-7, and Brewer, 1999, pp. 170-4.

<sup>4</sup> McDowell, 1994, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, 1958, § 279.

‘We can ensure that what we have in view is genuinely recognizable as a conceptual capacity if we insist that the very same capacity...can in principle persist beyond the duration of the experience itself...What is in play here is a recognitional capacity, possibly quite short-lived, that sets in with the experience.’<sup>6</sup>

To establish how this proposal is supposed to work, let us return to the case where a particular colour shade is featuring in a subject’s experience. I think that McDowell’s idea, then, amounts to this: the subject possesses a concept of the shade only if he is capable, after the shade no longer features in his experience, of telling whether or not a shade that features in a *new* experience falls under the very same concept.

So for instance, suppose that my experience represents an object as being a particular shade of blue. According to McDowell’s proposal, if I possess a concept for this exact shade, I must be capable, after the shade no longer features in my experience, of telling whether or not something is being represented to me in a new experience as being this exact shade of blue.

However, not all philosophers have been convinced by McDowell’s account of our possession of such demonstrative concepts. One common suggestion is that, as a matter of empirical fact, shades<sup>7</sup> just *do* feature in our experiences even when we lack the corresponding recognitional capacities that McDowell envisages: contra McDowell, a shade can feature in my experience even when I would not be able to tell, after the shade no longer features in my experience, whether or not a shade featuring in a new experience is identical to the original shade. Sean Kelly voices something like this worry when he claims that:

‘there’s nothing in the nature of perception to keep it from being true, that our capacity to discriminate colours exceeds our capacity to re-identify the colours discriminated.’<sup>8</sup>

And if Kelly is right, then either McDowell is wrong to suppose that demonstrative colour concept possession requires such recognitional capacities, or (as Kelly thinks) he is wrong to suppose that, as conceptualism implies, we must have demonstrative concepts for all the shades which feature in our experiences.

In response to this kind of concern (and unwilling to abandon his conceptualism), Bill Brewer has proposed a rather different account of demonstrative colour concept possession.<sup>9</sup> According to Brewer’s proposal, a possessor of a demonstrative concept of a shade featuring in an experience need not have the ability to tell, after the shade no longer features in the experience, whether or not a shade featuring in a new experience is identical to the original shade. Rather, the concept possessor must have the ability

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<sup>6</sup> McDowell, 1994, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Or heights, etc. Although I will focus on shades from now on, the points that I will make apply to other properties and relations.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, 2001, p. 411.

<sup>9</sup> Brewer, 2004, pp. 14-18.

‘to keep track of the same shade...during a single extended period of observation.’<sup>10</sup>

The key idea here then is that the demonstrative colour concept possessor need only keep track of the relevant shade during the course of a *single* experience: there is no requirement that he should be able to reidentify the shade after a complete *break* in (the shade’s featuring in the) experience. And *this* account, one might think, is one which is rather less likely to be shown empirically to be incompatible with conceptualism: from the philosopher’s armchair at least, it seems plausible that although (as a matter of empirical fact) our capacity to discriminate colours exceeds our capacity to reidentify the colours discriminated after a *break* in experience, our capacity to discriminate colours does *not* (as a matter of empirical fact) exceed our capacity to *keep track* of the colours discriminated over the course of a *single* experience.

## 5. The Incompatibility of Two Claims

But if the theorist decides to accept either McDowell’s stricter constraint or Brewer’s more liberal alternative condition on demonstrative colour concept possession, he will need to give an account of the *identity conditions* for the shades that feature in our experiences. For if a subject is to *recognise* that some shade which features in a new experience is identical to a shade which featured in a previous experience, or if he is to *keep track* of a particular shade over the course of a *single* experience, then it must be that there is only one shade in play: there must be only one shade that he reidentifies, or one shade of which he keeps track.

However, I do not think that the theorist should look to the conceptualists’ *own* accounts for an answer to this question, since this is a stage at which they themselves go wrong. For in providing such accounts, the conceptualists make two claims that are incompatible.

First, take McDowell’s suggestion that:

‘We might lay down the rule that something counts as having *that* shade just in case it is indiscriminable in colour from the indicated sample.’<sup>11</sup>

Call this *the identity of indiscriminables claim*. So if the claim is true, in order to possess a demonstrative concept of a shade that is featuring in my experience:

- (1) According to McDowell, I must have the capacity to tell, after the shade no longer features in my experience, whether or not a shade that features in a new experience is *indiscriminable* from the original shade; or,
- (2) According to Brewer, I must have the capacity to tell, at a later stage of the *same* experience, whether or not a shade that is featuring in the experience is *indiscriminable* from the original shade.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> McDowell, 1994, p. 170.

But as McDowell goes on to tell us, embracing the identity of indiscriminables claim threatens to raise a problem due to the (supposed) non-transitivity of colour indiscriminability.<sup>12</sup> To say that colour indiscriminability is non-transitive is to say that there are shades A, B, and C where B is indiscriminable in colour from both A and C, but C is discriminable in colour from A. Call this *the non-transitivity claim*. Such a claim threatens to raise a problem if we accept the identity of indiscriminables claim. For if *both* claims are true, such shades as A and C would seem, despite their being discriminable, to have to be identical since they are both indiscriminable from (and hence identical to) a third shade, B.

McDowell's proposed solution to this problem,<sup>13</sup> which Brewer also accepts,<sup>14</sup> is to insist that a shade A need *not* be identical to a shade C just because both shades are indiscriminable from a further shade B; rather, shade A must *itself* be indiscriminable from shade C if the two shades are identical. The reasoning here seems to be that once the theorist has ensured that this further rule is in place, there will no longer be a danger that he will have to count shades that are discriminable as nevertheless identical.

However, this apparent benefit comes at too great a price. For if the theorist accepts the conceptualists' story here, he will be forced also to accept a wholly bizarre view of the nature of identity. For according to the conceptualists' proposal, we should not count shade A as identical to shade C (since they are discriminable) despite the fact that both shades are identical to (since they are indiscriminable from) a further shade B. But this is absurd: if shade A is *identical* to shade B, then we don't have *two* shades – shade A on the one hand, and shade B on the other – rather we have a single shade which is going by two names. And this single shade cannot be *both* identical to, *and* different from, some further shade C.

For this reason, then, it seems to me that the apparent tension between the non-transitivity claim and the identity of indiscriminables claim is in fact perfectly genuine: there really is no right way to commit oneself to both.

## 6. Options for the Conceptualist

This is where Graff's arguments become relevant, since if (as I suspect) they do indeed establish that colour indiscriminability is transitive, it is clear what action the conceptualist should take: he should drop the non-transitivity claim.

However, if the conceptualist insists on rejecting Graff's view and retains his commitment to the non-transitivity claim, he will face serious consequences: he will then need to reject the identity of indiscriminables claim and with it *both* McDowell's *and* Brewer's constraints on demonstrative colour concept possession, since if the identity of indiscriminables claim is false, both constraints would be unsatisfiable. I shall now explain why this is.

Recall that according to McDowell's constraint, a possessor of a demonstrative concept of a shade featuring in an experience must have the capacity to tell, after the shade no longer features in the experience, whether

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 170-1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>14</sup> Brewer, 1999, p. 175.

or not a shade featuring in a new experience is identical to the original shade. However, *at best*, a subject might be able to tell if a shade featuring in a new experience is *indiscriminable* from a shade which featured in a previous experience. But if the indiscriminability of two such shades does not imply their identity, it seems impossible to see how a subject could, even in principle, have the capacity to tell if two shades are (not merely indiscriminable but also) identical. So if the conceptualist decides to drop the identity of indiscriminables claim, he must also concede that McDowell's constraint is unsatisfiable.

Precisely the same problem applies to Brewer's constraint: at best, the subject of an experience in which a particular shade features might have the capacity to tell, at a later stage of the experience, whether or not a shade featuring in the experience is *indiscriminable* from the original shade. But again, if the indiscriminability of the two shades does not imply their identity, it seems impossible to see how the subject could, even in principle, have the capacity at the later stage to tell if the relevant shade is (not merely indiscriminable but also) identical to the original shade. So again, if the conceptualist decides to drop the identity of indiscriminables claim, he must also concede that Brewer's constraint is unsatisfiable.

## 7. Possible Objections (1)

For these reasons, then, my conclusion will be that the conceptualist should accept Graff's view that colour indiscriminability is transitive. In order to establish that this conclusion is correct, however, I now want to consider two objections to it that the conceptualist might try to make.

To anticipate, the first objector suggests that rejecting the identity of indiscriminables claim is actually quite consistent with maintaining that McDowell's and Brewer's constraints are satisfiable. The second objector, by contrast, concedes that rejecting the identity of indiscriminables claim *does* mean admitting that the two constraints are unsatisfiable, but he suggests that demonstrative colour concept possession need not require satisfaction of either constraint in any case.

Firstly, then, I want to investigate the prospects for the conceptualist should he maintain that he can drop the identity of indiscriminables claim without thereby admitting that McDowell's and Brewer's constraints are unsatisfiable. One way in which he might try to do this is by conceding that since he has rejected the identity of indiscriminables claim, he must indeed admit that it is impossible for a subject in whose experience a particular shade is featuring:

- (1) To tell, after the shade no longer features in his experience, whether or not a shade that features in a new experience is (strictly speaking) identical to the original shade; or,
- (2) To tell, at a later stage of the *same* experience, whether or not a shade that is featuring in the experience is (strictly speaking) identical to the original shade.

But the conceptualist might then claim that the (strict) non-identity of two such shades need not stop them *counting* as the same for the purposes of the proposed constraints. On this view, the constraints revolve around the idea

that in order to possess a demonstrative colour concept, a subject need not have the capacity to tell if some later shade is *strictly speaking* identical to an earlier shade; rather, he must have the capacity to tell if the later shade *counts* as the same as the earlier shade, where the indiscriminability of the two shades ensures that they do indeed at least count as the same.<sup>15</sup>

For after all, the conceptualist might point out, the key motivation which underlay the imposition of the constraints in the first place was that they were supposed to ensure that a possessor of a demonstrative colour concept must have some bona fide ability to recognise when a shade falls under that concept, which would in turn ensure that he can properly be said to *know what it is* for something to fall under that concept. And if two shades that feature in a subject's experience *count* as the same, in virtue of their indiscriminability, then there seems nothing to prevent that subject correctly bringing them under a single demonstrative colour concept.

The response to this proposal is immediate, however. For if the two shades in question are not (strictly speaking) identical, then they make a (strictly speaking) different contribution to the content of the experiences in which they feature. So if the two shades are brought under a single demonstrative colour concept, this means that the features are more fine-grained than the concept under which those features are brought. And this is *precisely* the original difficulty which the conceptualist's appeal to demonstrative concepts was supposed to solve. Hence this first objection fails: if the conceptualist decides to drop the identity of indiscriminables claim, he must indeed accept that McDowell's and Brewer's constraints on demonstrative colour concept possession are unsatisfiable.

## 8. Possible Objections (2)

The second strategy that the conceptualist might pursue would involve conceding that if he rejects the identity of indiscriminables claim he must also admit that McDowell's and Brewer's constraints are unsatisfiable, but he might then question whether it follows from this admission that possession of demonstrative colour concepts is impossible. For there are good reasons to think, the conceptualist might claim, that demonstrative colour concept possession need *not* in fact require satisfaction of either constraint.

The idea here would be this. The original problem posed by Wittgenstein's case seemed to be that it placed the onus on the conceptualist to explain why there is a disanalogy between this case, on the one hand, and the case of the demonstrative colour concept possessor, on the other: it seemed that the conceptualist needed to tell us what it is that the demonstrative colour concept possessor *can* do, but Wittgenstein's subject *cannot* do, that ensures that the relevant concept is genuine.

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<sup>15</sup> Some of the conceptualists' remarks suggest that they themselves might be tempted by this view. For example, McDowell says: 'Something that counts as having a shade does not thereby count as a *sample* of the shade...' (1994, p. 171) One way (though not the only way) of interpreting this is as a concession that something which merely *has* a shade need not be strictly speaking identical in colour to something which is a *sample* of the shade. Note also Brewer's repeated talk of 'counting as a shade' in preference to talk of 'being a shade' (1999, p. 175).

But perhaps the correct response for the conceptualist to make here is not to impose the constraints on demonstrative colour concept possession that McDowell and Brewer do, but rather to claim that the very fact that the demonstrative colour concept possessor's experience features a particular shade is *itself* enough to put him in a position to know what it is for something to be that shade. (The conceptualist can happily admit that when the shade ceases to feature in his experience, he no longer has the relevant knowledge.) Now in Wittgenstein's case, the subject clearly does not know what it is for something to be 'this tall'. Or at least, this would be so if we imagine him (say) sitting in an armchair while performing his gestures. But in this case, the conceptualist might point out, the relevant property does *not* feature in his experience: if we rather imagine him gesturing in front of a mirror and so the property *were* featuring in his experience, it is by no means clear (the conceptualist might claim) that we would be so keen to deny that he had the relevant demonstrative concept.

I concede that there is indeed some initial plausibility in this suggestion. My response to it is to insist that (if the identity of indiscriminables claim is false, as the conceptualist is currently conceding) the mere fact that a subject's experience features a particular shade is not enough to enable him to know what it is for something to be that shade. For given that he cannot tell the difference between *that* shade (call it 'S1') and some *other* shade, call it 'S2', that is indiscriminable to him from S1, he simply does not know which shade S1 is.

Some may suspect that my response here is ineffective. For although the subject cannot tell the difference between S1 and S2, this is not in itself sufficient, the conceptualist might claim, to establish that he does not know exactly which shade S1 is. For he may be able to identify S1 *demonstratively*, the conceptualist might suggest, in such a way as to allow him to know exactly which shade it is.

The conceptualist might draw an analogy with the case of identical twins: suppose that I am looking at Amy, who has an identical twin, Becky, who looks so similar to Amy that I would be incapable of telling them apart. Does it follow that I do not know exactly who I am looking at? Seemingly not. If I am looking at Amy, it would seem plausible that I do know exactly who I am looking at, since I know that I am looking at *her* (as I might put it). And just as the fact that Amy has an identical twin is irrelevant to the question of whether I know exactly who I am looking at, the conceptualist might go on, so the fact that S2 is indiscriminable from S1 is irrelevant to the question of whether our envisaged subject knows exactly which shade it is that is featuring in his experience.

I have a two-part response to this line of argument. The first part is to suggest that the conceptualist's current appeal to demonstrative *identification* may be vulnerable to the same concerns that plagued his original appeal to demonstrative *concepts*. The conceptualist's original problem was to find a way to assure us that his envisaged demonstrative concepts really were genuine concepts. But his appeal to demonstrative *identification* at this later stage of the dialectic threatens to generate essentially the same difficulty: we still need a reason to believe that the supposed demonstrative identification really is a genuine form of identification.

The second part of the response is to suggest that the conceptualist's analogy with the case of identical twins does not supply us with such a reason. For although it is indeed plausible that I can identify twin Amy demonstratively in a way that allows me to know exactly who I am looking at, there is a key disanalogy between a case of this kind and the shades case.

The disanalogy consists in the fact that in the twins case, but not in the shades case, the relevant subject satisfies some version of Brewer's 'tracking' constraint on demonstrative concept possession: in the twins case, I can keep track of twin Amy while she continues to feature in my experience; in the shades case, by contrast, the subject cannot keep track of shade S1 while it continues to feature in his experience.

I shall illustrate this by describing two experiments that a scientist might perform, one involving the twins, and the other involving the shades. Suppose that in the first experiment, I am told to keep track of Amy continuously as she sits in front of me. At some point during the experiment, the scientist then sits Amy's sister Becky down beside her. The scientist then points to Becky and asks 'Did I tell you to keep track of *her*?'. My likely response to such a question seems clear: pointing to Amy, I would surely reply 'No – you told me to keep track of *her*.'

Suppose now that the scientist tells me to keep continuous track of shade S1, which happens to be instantiated by a particular card placed in front of me. (We can imagine the scientist emphasising the need for me to keep track of the shade that is instantiated by the card rather the card itself.) Then, after a period, the scientist places a second card down next to the first, but this second card instantiates shade S2. Pointing to the second card, the scientist then asks 'Did I tell you to keep track of *this* shade?'. Here my answer would surely be rather different: since S2 is indiscriminable to me from S1, I would be unable to tell that the shade instantiated by the second card is *not* the shade which I was supposed to be tracking.

Now recall that according to Brewer's constraint, in order to possess a demonstrative concept of a shade featuring in an experience, the subject must have the capacity to tell, at a later stage of the experience, whether or not a shade featuring in the experience is identical to the original shade. This condition seems not to be met in the envisaged case. For despite the fact that the original shade, S1, has featured continuously in my experience throughout the experiment, I am not in a position to tell that the second shade, S2, is different from the original shade. So according to Brewer's constraint, I lack a demonstrative concept of the original shade, S1.

An analogue of Brewer's constraint that applies to possession of demonstrative concepts of *objects* would look like this: in order to possess a demonstrative concept of an object featuring in an experience, the subject must have the capacity to tell, at a later stage of the experience, whether or not an object featuring in the experience is identical to the original object. Now this constraint *does* seem to be satisfied in the twins case: so long as Amy has featured continuously in my experience, I will immediately be in a position to tell that any *other* person (even her identical twin) that features in my experience is someone other than Amy.

Ultimately, then, the onus remains firmly on the conceptualist to explain how it is that in the shades case, even though neither McDowell's nor Brewer's constraint on demonstrative colour concept possession is met, I can

nevertheless identify shade S1 demonstratively. Certainly, the fact that demonstrative identification is possible in the twins case, when (an analogue of) Brewer's constraint *is* satisfied, gives us no reason to suppose that it is also possible in the shades case, when the constraint is *not* satisfied.

In the absence of any further conceptualist explanation, then, I conclude that my original response to the current objection remains correct: if the identity of indiscriminables claim is false, the mere fact that the supposed demonstrative colour concept possessor's experience features a particular shade is not enough to put him in a position to know what it is for something to be that shade, since it does not enable him to know which shade it is. And this in turn casts serious doubt on the idea that the supposed demonstrative concept is a genuine concept at all.

## 9. Conclusion

I will end by recapping on the structure of my argument. I have been arguing that the conceptualist should accept Graff's view that colour indiscriminability is transitive. He should do this since only by so doing can he retain a commitment to the identity of indiscriminables claim. This in turn is essential since only by retaining such a commitment can he accept the idea that (either of) the constraints that McDowell and Brewer impose on demonstrative colour concept possession are satisfiable. Finally, he does indeed need to accept this idea since there seems good reason to think that demonstrative colour concept possession is not possible if neither constraint is met.

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