

Comments on Bénédicte Veillet, "Concept Acquisition and Partial Conceptualism"
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20 March 2008

1. Three assumptions

Veillet begins by assuming that acquiring concepts sometimes changes the way things perceptually seem to us -- the way things look, feel, taste, or sound -- and argues that we might explain the experiential change in two ways. Either newly acquired concepts *causally* impact perceptual processing and thus impact experiential content, or newly acquired concepts themselves figure in the content of experience as *constituents*. If the former, acquiring concepts merely causally influences experiential content; if the latter, the acquired concepts comprise experiential contents.

I'll agree here to assume that *conceptualist* accounts of thought are ones on which thought contents are Fregean propositions. That is, the concepts that comprise thoughts are Fregean senses or modes of presentation.

I'll also agree to assume there exist three views about the nature of experiential contents and their relation to concepts. First, *nonconceptualism* is the view that concepts never figure in experience contents. Second, *conceptualism* is the view that experience contents are conceptual. Finally, *partial conceptualism* is the view that experience contents may include both nonconceptual and conceptual components or "layers" of components.

2. The argument

Veillet argues that there exist *certain* phenomenological changes that result from acquiring concepts -- changes that are reflected in experiential contents -- that neither nonconceptualists nor conceptualists adequately can explain. Partial conceptualism is the best candidate to explain these changes.

In these comments, I will focus on two issues. The first concerns the role of color and color concepts; the second concerns the partial conceptualist's own explanation for experiential changes.

A quick summary:

First, the master argument in favor of partial conceptualism crucially involves the case of color experience and the acquisition of color concepts. I question whether acquiring color concepts alters the phenomenology of color experience, and hint at a reason it may not. This suggests color concepts are suspect as an example of concepts that impact experience. The upshot is that the case of color should worry neither the causalist-nonconceptualist nor the constitutive-conceptualist.

Second, I want to raise a question about whether (and how) the partial conceptualist is in a position

to explain phenomenological changes that follow concept acquisition when such changes do occur. I raise this second question in the spirit of presenting an opportunity for further elaboration.

3. *Color experience and color concepts*

Not every concept, when learned, impacts perceptual experience. Even if learning the concepts KITE and PLOVER does make a difference to one's visual experience of a group of birds, learning the concept ELECTRON needn't make a difference to one's experience of a table. Rather, *observational* concepts or concepts whose possession includes a *recognitional* capacity, when acquired, can make a difference to experience. What does the work, however, appears to be the observational component or recognitional capacity, since having the concept PLOVER won't change experience if you can't visually identify those birds over there as plovers. Thus, gaining and deploying the capacity to visually identify something as belonging to a given class may impact experiential phenomenology in at least some cases. But does every case in which one gains a concept with an observational component or corresponding recognitional capacity impact the phenomenology of perceptual experience?

Consider the case of color. Why say that learning a color concept makes a difference to color experience? Veillet's example involves seeing a uniform red postcard. After art school, you see the postcard to be scarlet; your visual phenomenology with respect to the color has changed. Learning the concept SCARLET changes how you visually experience the color of the postcard.

I want to question whether this is the case. Consider the possession conditions for the concepts SCARLET and PLOVER. In order to be competent with the concept SCARLET, arguably, one needs only to be capable of recognizing its instances on the basis of visual experience. Suppose there is a corresponding purely recognitional component to the concept PLOVER. Even so, however, there is an important difference between SCARLET and PLOVER. One's naïve visual experience, prior to art school, *already* satisfies the phenomenological prerequisites for having the capacity to discern scarlet things. Put another way, the phenomenology required for recognizing instances of SCARLET plausibly existed when you saw the postcard prior to attending art school (though you may have lacked a name for it). Naïve color experience is phenomenologically determinate with respect to particular hues in a way that naïve avian experience is not phenomenologically determinate with respect to particular kinds of birds. That is, the phenomenology required for recognizing instances of PLOVER is at least partly absent from naïve visual experiences of birds. That requires extensive training, attention, practice, and corrective recalibration. So, though you could tell prior to art school, if prompted, when things look the same or differ with respect to shade, you may not be able to tell prior to training in birdwatching when birds are of the same visually recognizable kind. Arguably, therefore, there is no difference to the visual experience of a colored object before and subsequent to acquiring a determinate color concept it falls under.

If there is no difference between the visual experience of color before and after learning a color concept, what follows? First, the causalist need not worry about the failure of early selective

attention to select features and direct perceptual processes in such a way as to generate a difference to experiential content. The causalist can retain the plausible explanation for why gaining recognitional abilities associated with the concept PLOVER impacts experience -- they cause early attention to select different features and to differently organize individuals and features in experience -- while resisting the claim that learning a color concept causes changes to the features selected or to how they are organized in visual experience. Since just one feature exists to select all along, no phenomenological difference exists to be captured. The nonconceptualist therefore has comfortable ground in causalism.

Second, while there is no phenomenological change to the experience to explain in the case of color, acquiring other concepts might lead to phenomenological changes. So, those who prefer constitutive explanations for changes but who wish to remain conceptualists about the content of experience need not worry that the very same conceptual content is deployed in naïve and tutored color experience. Color concepts may be deployed in experience and in thought, and no phenomenological change to the experience results from gaining the capacity to deploy the concept in thought.

What about the conceptualist's story in the case where there *is* a phenomenological change that results from learning a concept, such as in the PLOVER example? Veillet suggests the conceptualist might distinguish the bird cases from the color cases by saying that when a phenomenological difference exists between naïve and tutored experiences, the acquired concept was not constitutive of the content of the naïve experience. This much seems right. Veillet suggests, however, that the conceptualist can say this plausibly only by insisting that "only low-level properties... can be represented in experience." This is indeed one way to account for the experiential change. But notice that 'experience' in the quoted portion is ambiguous. The claim could be that only low-level properties are represented in the *naïve* experience, prior to learning the more sophisticated concept. Or the claim could be that only low-level properties ever are represented in *any* experience. The latter appears to be the claim Veillet attributes to the conceptualist who wishes to draw a distinction between the color and bird cases. This understanding does lead to a problem for the constitutive-conceptualist who wants to say experience contents change after learning concepts.

I want to point out, nonetheless, that it's open to the constitutive-conceptualist to subscribe to the former reading. Only lower-level properties are represented in naïve experience, but once the concept is learned, PLOVER might become a constituent of the experience and thus explain the phenomenological difference. In fact, in the color case the conceptualist quite comfortably can say that no phenomenological difference is reflected in experiential contents precisely because color is a low-level property already represented, while PLOVER is one that requires further learning and recognitional abilities in order to become part of the content of perceptual experience.

4. Change and partial conceptualism

Veillet suggests that partial conceptualism is well placed to deal with the problems faced by both

nonconceptualism and conceptualism. Change to experiential content, including the case of color, can be explained by suggesting that there is a nonconceptual layer of content that might be supplemented by a conceptual layer upon concept acquisition. Phenomenological change to experience upon concept acquisition may result from the addition of a content constituent that is conceptual, without worry that that element was present before the concept could be deployed in thought.

But notice how both the (causalist) nonconceptualist and the (constituent) conceptualist aimed to explain the phenomenological change. The causalist-nonconceptualist says that new features and items are represented after acquiring a concept because possessing it changes how processes of early attention are directed. The constituent-conceptualist says that a new concept not previously possessed now enters the content of experience, and so new properties are represented. Both explanations appeal to *something new* that was not previously represented in experience in order to explain the phenomenological changes that accompany concept acquisition. The change to representational content explains the change to experience.

But, as the case of color makes clear, the (constituent) partial conceptualist does not appeal to something newly represented in order to explain the phenomenological difference. Rather, the presence of a new *kind* of content -- conceptual content -- explains the difference. According to the partial conceptualist, since one can nonconceptually experientially represent the property *red-17* prior to having the corresponding concept, and since after coming to possess the concept RED-17 (i.e., SCARLET) one can conceptually experientially represent the property *red-17*, something about the difference between nonconceptually and conceptually experientially representing makes a difference to "the way things look, feel, sound or taste to us." That is, the difference between representing nonconceptually and conceptually alone makes a difference to one's phenomenal experience of color. To be clear, the (constituent) partial conceptualist must hold that a phenomenological difference to perceptual experience accrues when a property one has been representing all along, but in a Russellian or possible-worlds-based fashion, comes to be represented by means of a Fregean concept or sense. The manner of representing (the vehicle), rather than what is represented, for the constituent-partial-conceptualist but not for the causal-nonconceptualist or constituent-conceptualist, serves to explain the phenomenological difference that accrues from acquiring a concept.

I want to conclude simply by presenting two questions raised by the structure of this explanation. First, what is it about the fact that a representation is a *conceptual* representation of a given property, rather than a *nonconceptual* representation of that very same property, that makes a phenomenological difference to the experience? Second, what is a plausible candidate for that in which the phenomenological difference consists?