

# THE RESISTANCE OF THE GIVEN

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**Abstract** It has convincingly been asserted that only what is conceptually formed can enter the space of reasons, and that only within the latter can we properly speak of knowledge in a way that is specific of human nature. I purport to show 1) that, even if true, this does not mean that only what is intrinsically conceptual can have epistemic efficacy, 2) that we are able rationally to see nonconceptual contents, and 3) that the “vision” of nonconceptual content plays an essential role within the realm of epistemic rationality. Nonconceptual content is, indeed, *given*, and its resistance plays a fundamental role to allow us to *know* that we are in touch with the world.

To help us to realize the interplay between conceptual and nonconceptual contents of experience, and how the nonconceptual can genuinely be rationally given before and beyond any mystification of givenness, the paper makes use of Dretske’s idea of simple seeing, and refines it through some Husserlian phenomenological descriptions, reflections, and insights, concerning our perceptual and cognitive life.

**Keywords** Simple seeing – Nonconceptual content – Dretske – Husserl – Perceptual Evidence Thesis

## 1 Introduction

I am strolling around the city center, when I meet Lucy. She tells me that she is looking for a new teapot. I realize that I just saw one in the shop close to city hall, and I offer to accompany her there. I do this both because I want to make sure that she can find her way to the right shop—she is new in town, and not familiar with its alleys and shops—and to verify that I really saw the teapot. Indeed, when I saw it, I did not really pay attention to it. Nevertheless, I have a vivid feeling I saw a teapot, and that it was in that shop near city hall. At any rate, we go together to the shop, and the teapot is, indeed, there.

In this brief, trivial story, many epistemic elements are involved. Here I am mainly interested in two of them, which are strictly interconnected with one another:

1. One sees what one believes to be there.

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2. One believes something is there on the basis of what one believes to have seen, *although one saw it without properly paying attention to it.*

Obviously, the core of my story lies in my “feeling” that I have seen a teapot. How should we interpret such a feeling? It is quite clear that, according to which understanding of the term “feeling” we have, different theoretical scenarios concerning the perceptual “given” and cognition appear.

I will here endorse the view that the chronologically secondary vision of the teapot depicted in my story, provides knowledge in the strict sense of the word, namely, in a way that is both compatible with the classical account of knowledge as justified true belief,<sup>2</sup> and with knowledge in the sense of a primitive mental state as proposed in knowledge-first approaches.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, I will try to argue that the first vision of the teapot, could be considered as non-epistemic, namely, as a case of “simple seeing”, made prominent by Dretske in the English speaking philosophical debates held in the last fifty years.<sup>4</sup> This means that when I first see the teapot, I do not notice it and I have no belief concerning it. While this position will need some more detailed clarifications, we will be able to achieve them thanks to some reflections and observations on perception and sensations carried out by Husserl in his *Logical Investigations*.

As for the understanding of the second case of perception as epistemically relevant, a central issue concerns whether, in order to verify the allegedly corresponding thought, perception needs to be conceptual or not, and to which extent, that is to say, whether fully or only partially. I will, here, dedicate only

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<sup>2</sup> Within the limits of this paper, it is not possible to consider which specific anti-Gettier formulation of the classical account one should choose. The issue, is, actually, quite irrelevant to the purposes of this article. With that said, in section 3 I will sketch a fulfilment-theory of knowledge in a Husserlian spirit, which seems to me as the most adequate to account for episodes like the last one of the teapot story.

<sup>3</sup> The reference is, obviously, to Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Although I have no time to dwell on this point, I am inclined to believe that the perspective on the given I offer here, is generally in agreement with the broad concept of knowledge Williamson proposes, which, indeed, also explicitly includes perceptual experience as a form of knowledge, and with the idea that one can be considered to possess knowledge although one does not know it.

<sup>4</sup> See Fred Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969). To be precise, the first term Dretske used to label such a kind of visual experience is “non-epistemic seeing” or “seeing<sub>n</sub>”. I will here use both the term “simple seeing”, and “non-epistemic seeing”. Dretske characterizes non-epistemic seeing in the following way:  
a) it “is an ability whose successful exercise is devoid of positive belief content”;  
b) “a way of seeing such that for any proposition, P, the statement ‘S sees D’ does not logically entail the statement ‘S believes P’”;

“Let D be any familiar object, person, or event—a book, a friend, or a sunrise. When we see D, although, normally, we frequently do identify what we see as D, and hence believe that it is D, this identification is not a necessary condition for our seeing D” (Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, 6–7).

some brief remarks to this issue in some preliminary sections. I will basically endorse Hopp's account of the relationship between perception and knowledge,<sup>5</sup> and I will raise one question he does not specifically address: how is it possible to epistemically see that there is non-conceptual content? This could seem like a trivial question once one has endorsed a non-conceptualist position concerning perceptual contents, but I believe it is one of the most serious issues that Sellars's myth of the given has left uncovered, or unsatisfactorily covered, as well as that which has forced McDowell repeatedly to come back to the issue of the "friction" of our beliefs with the world, despite his apparent full endorsement, at the very least since McDowell's *Mind and World*,<sup>6</sup> of conceptualism.

The situation Sellars has left us with is such that we can either opt for a vulgar Kantian view, according to which purely perceptual experiences deliver us a blob, upon which we impose the seal of our intellect, or we endorse a theory according to which there is an analogical relationship between our thoughts and our percepts. In both cases, what seems to be impossible is that we *know* that there is something aside from our conceptual grasp—assuming that only what is conceptual or, at least, isomorphic with concepts, can properly be admitted into the space of reasons. In other words, the question is whether we see only what we understand, can understand, or know how to react to.

I am here mainly interested in working out the experiential *as well as* epistemic relevance of a kind of perceptual content that somehow does not directly enter into the space of reasons in the proper sense, that is definitely nonconceptual, and that does not even need directly to match with any belief. On the contrary, it rather emerges as a specific kind of perceptual content that contrasts and, at the same time, supports our conceptual intentions. In a sense, I will consider cases of perception, and, particularly, of seeing,<sup>7</sup> that, as it were, apparently have no "rational" content—if we assume that only what is conceptual can live in the space of reasons.

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<sup>5</sup> See Walter Hopp, *Perception and Knowledge: A Phenomenological Account* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> I will, in this regard, follow the mainstream in the recent and less recent debates in philosophy of perception and focus solely on visual experiences.

As we all know, the father of the Myth of the Given himself<sup>8</sup> has acknowledged that it would be absurd to assert that nothing is given, namely, that there is no given at all:

If the term 'given' referred merely to what is observed as being observed, or, perhaps, to a proper subset of the things we are said to determine by observation, the existence of 'data' would be as uncontroversial as the existence of philosophical perplexities.<sup>9</sup>

The exorcism performed by Sellars, at least in the clear and perspicuous exegesis offered by deVries and Triplett, is directed against understandings of the given that consider it as being both *epistemically independent* and *epistemically efficacious*.<sup>10</sup>

To avoid such a myth, and Sellarsian counterspells, one could simply propose that there is something which is experienced, but is not known. In this way, however, one would not simply have no convincing way to claim that what is (sensuously) given plays some role in our epistemic life. What is more, such a deflationist conception of the given, sooner or later, would consequently also lead us to assert that there is no evidence that something is given this side of our conceptual capacities, if not as a result of an abductive story in the wave of balladeer Jones. Therefore, it seems necessary to me that we manage to understand how what is "simply seen" *can* also enter the field of our direct and conceptually informed awareness, and, thus, become epistemically relevant—and indeed fundamental in order to give sense to our (empirical) epistemic life as such—without becoming conceptually informed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In a way, there is no proper father of the myth of the given, being it rather a superstition, as it were, that has contaminated disparate epistemological views throughout the history of philosophy, but whose origin is unknown. What is more, Sellars is certainly not the first to diagnose such a myth. Besides Hegel, explicitly recognized by Sellars, and Quine, whose work is certainly known to Sellars, another source Sellars could have not so easily ignored is W. H. F. Barnes, "The myth of sense-data," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 45, n. 1, 1945, 89–118. That said, Sellars should be accredited as being the one who has told the story of the mythical inventor of the myth, namely Jones, and, thus, Sellars is the one who, by telling the origin of the myth, puts into form the myth itself.

<sup>9</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Willem A. deVries and Timm Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given: Reading Wilfrid Sellars's "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"* (Cambridge Mass.: Hackett, 2000), XXVI.

<sup>11</sup> Someone could claim that, for Dretske, this is either impossible or too easy. Simple seeing is the way it is whether or not its object is noticed or cognitively digested. If the object is not noticed, then the subject cannot extract information from simple seeing, which means simple seeing cannot make contribution to the subject's cognitive life. If the object of simple seeing is noticed and cognitively digested then what we have is a case of epistemic seeing which will certainly contribute to our cognitive life. As a consequence, if

To go back to my initial story, the question is: how can I have seen the teapot, without noticing it, while being *now* able to have it cognitively digested? And how can I afterwards realize what I had previously non-epistemically, or nonconceptually, seen? This paper exactly aims to offering a contribution to the clarification of how this is, indeed, possible.<sup>12</sup>

I will try to show that, if we manage to allow a specific form of nonconceptual seeing that is a part of our pre-reflective, but *not* sub-personal, consciousness, this can be shown to constitute an experiential layer that persists also in cases of conceptual seeing, and exactly as that layer that allows us to speak of a given that, although it neither constitutes a reason in the strict sense nor properly justifies beliefs, and, since it is not subject to inferential constraints, *is* epistemically efficacious even though it cannot be properly situated in the mere "realm of causes". In brief, I will argue that—at least on the level of empirical knowledge—the *given* is what supplies us with the certainty that *there is* something to know, and that some of our thoughts, beliefs, and so forth, are allowed or supported by it, while in other cases they are, in a manner of speaking, "rejected" by it.

To reach this goal, I will consider several layers of perceptual experience, some of which could be considered as "conceptual"—not because their contents

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I intend to concentrate on the former case, then the answer should clearly be negative, to wit, simple seeing can offer no contribute to the cognitive life of a subject. Such an objection, however, would entirely miss the point of Dretske's insistence on simple seeing. To say that, for Dretske, simple seeing has no epistemic relevance tout-court is to neglect the fundamental role he ascribes to simple seeing in all cases of epistemic seeing. To be sure, the ascription of epistemic relevance to simple seeing could easily fall pray of the myth of the given. In what follows, I will try to free Dretske's proposal from this possible mystification. I will propose a view according to which epistemic seeing consists in extracting information from simple seeing. However, this, in turn, requires that one shows that simple seeing is not a mythical entity.

<sup>12</sup> Dretske offers examples that are similar to my initial story. For instance: "I have occasionally been in such a preoccupied state that as I walked down the street I was, in the only way I can think to describe it, unaware of everything around me. It was only after I snapped out of the 'fog' that I realized I had been seeing certain things without being aware of it; that is, I can remember having seen things, but I cannot remember being aware, at the time I was seeing them, that I was seeing something or that things were looking a certain way to me. One could, I suppose, continue to insist that I was believing something at the time about the things which I saw, but that I simply can no longer remember the fact. Or, alternatively, one could insist that in such a preoccupied state I did not really see anything. One could cling to this view, but why? Is there something logically incoherent about saying, 'I must have seen it, but, at the time, I was totally unaware of anything but that pain in my foot'? Does this statement stand self-accused, on internal grounds alone, of being false?" (Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, 11–12) I would consider my example as being partially different, in as much as mine explicitly thematizes the possibility to recover uninterpreted, as it were, visual data, and focuses on the question of how such visual data can reasonably be understood as something we have/had consciousness of.

are, as such, conceptual, but because they can correspond to conceptual contents –, while others surface in the space of reasons as noticeably nonconceptual. This could be considered as different from a “standard” view, according to which, for both the conceptualist and the nonconceptualist, the content of experience is conceptual if it presupposes conceptual capacities. Typically, the nonconceptualist would then insist that the content of experience is both nonconceptual and corresponding to the relevant conceptual content. That said, I believe that for the nonconceptualist it is of fundamental importance also to account for how we can *know* that nonconceptual content is there, and that it corresponds or not to conceptual content. To do this, one must be able to conceptually grasp the presence of nonconceptual content. The following pages are devoted to this issue. Before I start my endeavor, however, a preliminary clarification of some of the main concepts involved in my argumentation is in order.

## 2 Preliminary Clarifications I – sense-data

Sense-data are nowadays, for the most, discredited entities. One of the main causes of such a discredit has arguably been Sellars’s attack against sense-data theorists. The two main reasons deriving from Sellars to dismiss sense-data *theories* are that these consider sense-data as epistemically more fundamental than the awareness of external common-sense objects—or, as deVries and Triplett say, “medium-sized dry goods”<sup>13</sup> –, and as being particulars. In this regard, neither Dretske nor Husserl endorse any sense-data *theory*. This, however, does not imply that they are also compelled to deny that sense-data exist at all, but only that they should not be understood as independent entities, or as something, of which we have (undoubted) knowledge prior to our awareness of external objects.

As for Husserl, it is known that he gives more and more importance within his work to the concept of *hyle* and *hyletic data*. Husserl is well aware, at least since the *Logical Investigations*, that we are normally not thematically aware of hyletic data, or sense-contents [*Empfindungsinhalte*], but he also stakes out that we can thematically *see* them through reflection on our perceptual experiences.

Although Dretske explicitly rejects sense-data theories,<sup>14</sup> the main reason he seems to have to reject them is that they consider sense-data as something different from the real properties or parts of external objects. In this regard, if we offer, as I will do, a view of sense-data that does basically not consider them as something different from properties of external objects, we can believe that

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<sup>13</sup> deVries and Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given*, xxxix, 173.

<sup>14</sup> See Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, 64 and following pages.

Dretske's understanding of simple seeing would have no reason to be incompatible with them.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Dretske considers simple seeing as "a way of seeing [...] that is distinct from, but nonetheless fundamental to, an organism's higher-level cognitive and conceptual activities".<sup>16</sup> There is an ambiguity in the way Dretske characterizes such a fundamental way of seeing. Simple seeing seems to be responsible for delivering to the subject the material upon which the subject can exercise her conceptual capacities. Dretske proposes an analogy, according to which the sensory system works like a postal service:

The sensory system is the postal system in this total cognitive enterprise. It is responsible for the delivery of information, and its responsibility ends there. What we do with this information, once received, whether we are even capable of interpreting the messages so received, are questions about the cognitive-conceptual resources of the perceiver. If you don't take the letters from the mailbox, or if you can't understand them once you do, don't blame the postal system. It has done its job. The trouble lies elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

Put in this way, one could suspect that the information delivered by the sensory system is something which keeps on a subpersonal level as long as the subject does not pick up the letters. On the other hand, Dretske tries to clarify his notion of simple seeing by saying that "visual experience [is] the rich and profuse thing, [in which] we see more than we can ever notice or attend to. [...] The sensory systems, and in particular the visual system, delivers more information than we can ever (cognitively) digest. The postal system deposits junk mail at a rate that exceeds our capacity to read it."<sup>18</sup> This and many other descriptions of simple seeing seem to legitimize a reading of it as corresponding to a state of mind in which one has only sensory data that have not been "apprehended" as properly informing the perceiver about the presence, in the visual field, of a certain object or another. The belief in the presence of an object or another requires more than simple seeing—it requires the employment of conceptual

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<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, some critics have even accused Dretske of falling into a kind of sense data theory. See, for instance, John Heil, "Perceptual experience", in *Dretske and His Critics*, ed. Brian McLaughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Remarkably, Dretske has not really defended himself against such an accusation. To the contrary, he has openly stated that his view "can be considered as mentalistic" (Fred Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 112), but not therefore as contrary to naturalism. I cannot delve into this issue, here, given that it would require us to consider Dretske's peculiar form or representationalism, and, thus, far beyond the scope of the "simple" resistance of the given.

<sup>16</sup> Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief*, 97–99.

<sup>17</sup> Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief*, 110, italics mine.

capacities, as it were. That said, the merely sensory information gained through simple seeing cannot be something lying fully below the threshold of consciousness, otherwise Dretske could not say that we “see more than we can ever notice or attend to”.

Of course, there is room for divergent interpretations of Dretske’s proposal. In this article, I will clearly opt for a view according to which there is some kind of awareness concerning the pre-digested information delivered by the sensory system, and, in the following, I will try to elucidate this possible state of mind, or of experience, by reference to some ideas by Husserl. As a matter of fact, I believe that within the frameworks of these two authors there is place for non-mythical and ontologically inexpensive sense-data—inexpensive in as much as they do not require more than commonsensical objects’ properties and their (direct) manifestations to subjects. What is more, as I will try to show, the reflections on perception and knowledge of Husserl and Dretske allow us to envision a view of sense-data as *one* fundamental element of the cognitive grip of the world on our thoughts and beliefs, and signally as that element of the world we can epistemically see as lying also beyond, or this side of, our conceptual grasp. In brief, I will claim that sense-data *can* resist cognitive digestion, and literally *show* that the world can *disagree* with our conceptual assimilation of it. If my proposal is correct, then we can say that we can non-inferentially *know* that the world lies (also) beyond our conceptual capacities,<sup>19</sup> and our conceptual experience.

Obviously, this would not be possible if we consider sense-data as mental objects, in the way some classical sense-data theorists did. There is, however, a different way to understand sense-data, namely as the data our sensory system delivers to us, but keep external to our mind, as it were. I assume this way of defining sense-data will irritate some readers: Why not using another term, for instance that of “hyletic data” proposed by Husserl and recalled above? And why not “qualia”, to which Dretske explicitly refers? My reason for using the term “sense-data” is sixfold:

1. One of the most detailed accounts of sense-data is offered by H. H. Price, and he explicitly argues that sense-data are not objects in the sense of substances, but rather events or occurrences in experience.<sup>20</sup> This notable understanding of sense-data can be quite in accordance with the way I propose to understand what simple seeing consists of—albeit I will insist that such entities are not immanent to the subject.
2. Sellars’s attack against sense-data was not meant fully to deny their existence, but rather their presumptive role as bedrock of our epistemic building. In this paper, I try to offer a way to develop the idea of Sellars, according to which we have *learnt* to observe sense-data, aka inner episodes,

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<sup>19</sup> I do not intend to make any absolute claim concerning the conceptual incapacity to grasp the non-conceptual *given*. It could also be a temporary or accidental *impasse*. The decision concerning this issue must be left for other reflections.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Habberley Price, *Perception* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1932), 113–116.



while avoiding to believe that they have an epistemic priority in our overall knowledge of the world and ourselves, and that they can play an epistemic role independently of our conceptual apparatus.

3. Husserl's "hyletic data" also have an ambiguous status. It is possible to read them as something fully "immanent," as if they were the matter of consciousness itself, on the basis of which a perceptual consciousness of something transcendent is built. This reading would clearly lead us to some kind of idealism *à la Berkeley*.<sup>21</sup>

4. Something similar can be said for the term "qualia", about which there is no general agreement as whether it refers to inner or to outer stuff. Dretske seems to opt for the second view. Such a view is far from dominant, though. The latter, moreover, has the advantage of keeping more explicit the connection with the delivery work of the sensory system proposed by Dretske himself.

5. If one leaves specific (internalist and/or foundationalistic) theories of sense-data aside, the term sense-data simply seems to refer to the data the senses deliver to the subject. If understood in this naive way, sense-data seem to be the best term to speak of what Dretske tells us about non-epistemic seeing or simple seeing, namely, as characterizing the stuff the "sensory system" delivers to us. To use the term "sense-data" seems to me the most natural way to speak of such a delivery. The matter is, then, to understand what such a delivery properly consists in, and how we can disclose its basic, pre-epistemic items.

6. For reasons in line with the understanding of sense-data as referring to what is *delivered* to a subject, I will also leave aside another terminological option proposed by Sellars, who makes a distinction between sense-data and sense-contents:<sup>22</sup> sense-data imply that the *datum* at stake is effectively sensed by someone, while sense-contents are also conceivable independently of such a sensing—although as potential data of sensing. Since my purpose is to discuss the conscious awareness of sensory data, I find it appropriate to speak of sense-data, but this does not imply that sense-data are not data pertaining, and even belonging, in a way or another, to physical objects.

In sum, in this article I will use the term "sense-data" to refer to the content of sensory consciousness which pertain to phenomenal qualities of the outer world. I will claim that the thematic awareness of sense-data *follows* that of objects in the strict sense, and that, nevertheless, we can have a cognitive and direct grasp of them. In this regard, sense-data are possibly given in a way that resist conceptual intentions.

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<sup>21</sup> This risk has been pointed out by Hermann Ulrich Asemissen, *Strukturanalytische Probleme der Wahrnehmung in der Phänomenologie Husserls* (Cologne: Kölner Universitäts-Verlag, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> See Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 15.

### 3 Preliminary Clarifications II – Conceptual and nonconceptual content

The literature on the topic of conceptual/nonconceptual content is, as it is well known, over-abundant. Moreover, as Walter Hopp pointed out a few years ago, it is also quite messy.<sup>23</sup> Before we try to carve out some quite univocal definition of what conceptual means, and thus clarify what can be considered as nonconceptual, we need to emphasize that contents and objects should not be confused.

Of course, one could reject the very idea that perceptual content exists. I cannot defend the opposite view, here. I will limit myself to referring to Dretske,<sup>24</sup> Hopp,<sup>25</sup> Schellenberg<sup>26</sup> for some good arguments in favor of its existence, and to offering a very simple example that persuasively, if not conclusively, speaks in favor of the distinction between content and object that anyone can experience: when we wear and remove spectacles. This extremely trivial case seems to me already sufficient to realize that the change in the way an object is given and the object itself are not identical, and that, thus, content and object must, both conceptually and phenomenologically, be kept distinct.<sup>27</sup>

Equally trivial to this is that, once the distinction between content and object is accepted, if we consider knowledge as implying concepts, this does not mean that objects must have a conceptual structure, but only that the contents by means of which objects are intended, or given to us, must be conceptual, in order for them to count as belonging to the space of reasons.

All that said, we need to understand how conceptual contents differentiate themselves from nonconceptual ones. In this regard, Evan's Generality Constraint is a good ground rule:

We cannot avoid thinking of a thought about an individual object  $x$ , to the effect that it is  $F$ , as the exercise of two capacities; one being the capacity to think of  $x$ , which could be equally exercised in thoughts about  $x$  to the effect that it is  $G$  or  $H$ ; and the other being a conception

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<sup>23</sup> See Hopp, *Knowledge and Perception*, 130.

<sup>24</sup> See Fred Dretske, "The role of the percept in visual cognition," *Perception and cognition issues in the foundations of psychology. Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science* 9, n. 1, 1978, 107–127.

<sup>25</sup> See Hopp, *Knowledge and Perception*, ch. 1. See also Walter Hopp, "Is seeing intentional? A response to Travis," *Methodos* 14, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Susanna Schellenberg, "Perceptual content defended", *Noûs* 45, n. 4, 714–750.

<sup>27</sup> It could also be good to remember that a big part of the current debate on conceptual and nonconceptual content derives from Evans's discussion of Frege's senses as "modes of presentation", and that this is the dominant English translation of what Frege called *Art des Gegebenseins*, that is "way of being given".

of what it is to be *F*, which could be equally exercised in thoughts about other individuals, to the effect that they are *F*.<sup>28</sup>

According to this definition, the generality constraint clearly implies the compositionality of the way in which an object is intended. We will later see how this is of fundamental importance to keeping different ways of perceptual experience out of the proper scope of conceptualization, and in which sense something can be given in a way that does not properly correspond to any concept.

Another essential feature of conceptual content has been pointed out by Hopp under the title of the "Detachability Thesis":

C is a conceptual content only if it is a detachable content, that is, it is possible for C to serve as the content of a mental state M in which the relevant objects, properties, and/or states of affairs that C is about are not perceptually or intuitively present to the subject of M.<sup>29</sup>

By means of this thesis, Hopp basically establishes that:

$$\diamond(Cx \wedge \neg Px)^{30}$$

That is to say: it is possible to have conceptual content and no corresponding perceptual content.

Although this thesis is notably important, it is not enough really to contrast, and, at least partially, confute, conceptualists *à la McDowell*. To do this, we also need to establish

$$\diamond(\neg C \wedge P)$$

Indeed, it is not sufficient to state that we can have conceptual contents independently of perception. We rather need to show that perceptual content can be there even in the absence of concepts, and that we can "rationally" see them as such.

The problem, in this case, is that, before we intend an object conceptually, all other ways, if there are any, of being in relationship with it stay outside of the space of reasons, and this seems to imply, keeping with Evans, that it also remains outside of the space of consciousness, or awareness. Indeed, although Evans himself is not particularly clear as to whether nonconceptual content is conscious or non-conscious, John Campbell has quite convincingly argued for an

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<sup>28</sup> Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 75.

<sup>29</sup> Hopp, *Knowledge and Perception*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> "P" stands for "perceptual content," as you might expect.

interpretation, according to which nonconceptual content is non-conscious until our conceptual capacities are put to work.<sup>31</sup>

Before we can embark on the search for an alternative view on the matter, we need to understand which idea of knowledge to endorse now that content and object of experience are kept apart of each other.

## 4 Preliminary Clarifications III – Knowledge as synthetic intuition

Following what Husserl asserts in his *Logical Investigations*, and keeping in mind the distinction between content and object, we can say that knowledge consists in an overlapping between contents of different acts *and* the intuition of such an overlapping.

In the strictest sense of knowledge, the kind that, in my story above, I have attributed to my fifth episode of seeing, the overlapping is between the content of a (linguistic)<sup>32</sup> thought, that is by definition conceptual, and that of an intuitive act,<sup>33</sup> which gives us the object “in the flesh”.

In the story I provided at the outset of this paper, the moment I went back to the shop and saw that the teapot was there, is a paradigmatic case of epistemic seeing, in which one looks in order to verify whether one’s idea matches what one sees. To perceive and to think of the same object, is not enough to know it, though. One also needs to “see” that the two contents overlap. It goes without saying that this further “intuitive” element complicates the picture quite a bit. It is equally obvious that this point would require a specific treatment, which would exceed the limits of this paper. I will limit myself to noting a couple of aspects of the issue that are relevant for my claim that there is a kind of given that is nonconceptual which we *epistemically see* as nonconceptual.

The issue concerning the intuition of the synthesis between two heterogeneous but, somehow, isomorphic, contents, is, at least in a Husserlian

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<sup>31</sup> See John Campbell, “Information-processing, phenomenal consciousness and molyneux’s question”, in *Thought, Reference, and Experience: Themes from the Philosophy of Gareth Evans*, ed. José L. Bermúdez (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Whether thought without language is possible, and what it could amount to, cannot be considered, here.

<sup>33</sup> I use here Husserl’s expression “intuitive act” as the genus to which also (acts of) perception belong. For Husserl, intuitions (*Anschaungen*) can also refer to abstract (Husserl would say ‘ideal’) entities, such as numbers and logical laws. Within the limits of this article, however, I will only refer to *sensuous* intuitions, as well as to the kind of intuition we achieve when we “see” the overlapping between conceptual and perceptual contents. For a general interpretation and appreciation of Husserl’s notion of intuition, see Jaakko Hintikka, “The notion of intuition in Husserl,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 2, 2003, 57–79.

setting, clearly connected with the notion of evidence. Following Hopp,<sup>34</sup> we could speak of evidence as justifying reason. Basically, the idea is that if I believe X, and X is perceived, I have evidence of the truth of my belief. However, for the perceptual presence to work as evidence for the truth of my belief, I need to realize that both my perception and my belief refer to the same object. What makes my belief true is not perception itself, indeed, but the object.<sup>35</sup>

My belief alone would never be able to get directly in view of the object, though. This kind of operation is the exclusive right of intuitive acts. Intuition is, thus, responsible for *giving evidence* that the object is there and that it can be apprehended in a way that is in accordance with my belief about it. A passage by Hopp can help us to understand this situation better:

I can state a belief. I cannot state a perception. Nevertheless, although the content of perception can't figure in judgments or beliefs, its objects are just the things beliefs aim at. In fulfillment, what the belief merely represents is presented. The term 'fulfillment', then, has a dual sense: it doesn't just register the fact that an empty intention gets filled out with intuitive content, but that a certain end inherent in believing itself has been achieved. Beliefs aim at the truth

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<sup>34</sup> Hopp, *Knowledge and Perception*, 99.

<sup>35</sup> For this reason, Berghofer's proposal of a mentalistic reading of Husserl's "evidentialism" seems to me quite problematic. On the one hand, it would almost inevitably lead to a form of (vulgar) Cartesianism that would fall prey of Sellars's anathema. Indeed, it would seem to imply that we can have evidence only of our "inner" representations. On the other, it seems to betray Husserl's idea that, in intuition, "the things themselves" are the truthmakers of our beliefs. Certainly, things are given *in the flesh* thanks to intuitions, or through intuition, if you like. With that said, the justifiers are not intuitions, but what intuitions present, or reveal. Berghofer's "mentalist evidentialism" seems to respect the idea that only propositions can justify propositions, but I believe that, in this way, he concedes too much to coherentism. In brief, I would favor an understanding of Husserl's teachings, according to which *not* "experiences are the ultimate source of epistemic justification" (Philipp Berghofer, "On the nature and systematic role of evidence: Husserl as a proponent of mentalist evidentialism?" *European Journal of Philosophy* 27, n. 1, 112), but rather the objects that are disclosed in intuitive experiences. Only in this way can we reasonably account for the fallibility of evidence that Berghofer insists on highlighting. As I will try to show, it is, indeed, only if we are able to allow that something gets manifested in experience that we do not properly grasp, that the "friction" of the world can get vindicated, and we do not enclose our epistemic life within a circle of *inner* coherence. Our belief that there is something to know cannot be based on positive evidence, indeed. To reduce the evidence of non-p, as Berghofer does, to the total sum of evidence a believer has at disposal, is insufficient, in my view, to overcome a form of internalism that, almost inevitably, trespasses into solipsistic idealism. For a different understanding of the epistemic circle, that seems to me to do justice of the experiential transcendence of the world, see David Woodruff Smith, *The Circle of Acquaintance. Perception, Consciousness, and Empathy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).

but, with equal immediacy, the direct consciousness of truth, and that is what fulfillment is. In epistemic fulfillment, we ratify a truth-bearer by consulting its truthmaker, and are directly aware of the match between them. Just in virtue of having beliefs, that is what you want to happen to them—though, of course, you might want other things a lot more.<sup>36</sup>

“Fulfilment” is the well-known key-concept of Husserl’s idea of knowledge. As Hopp’s passage also shows, when fulfillment occurs, it *shows* to us that the object meant by the conceptual content is there. Indeed, perceptual content, in the synthesis of fulfillment, does not appear as such, but rather shows its object. Therefore, we do not properly see the overlapping between two contents, but we rather *see* the object itself as agreeing, or disagreeing, with our beliefs. Perceptual content is responsible for making objects present. Yet, once this occurs together with corresponding, that is, isomorphic, conceptual content, we “cognitively see” the object.

We could wrap up the core idea of knowledge as an intuition produced by a synthesis of fulfillment as follows:

*The presence perceptual content can provide is what belief is in search of.*

I suppose that such an understanding of the relationship between conceptual and perceptual contents could possibly also be accepted by (at least some) conceptualists. Indeed, it does not disprove the idea that we properly realize that something is there, and thus justify our beliefs, only when we deploy concepts, and that only what goes through the lenses of conceptual thought can count as part of a subject’s properly conscious epistemic life.

Both in his book *Knowledge and Perception* and in several articles,<sup>37</sup> Hopp has argued persuasively in favor of a non-conceptualist understanding of perception. I find Hopp’s arguments very convincing and, as far as I can tell, as conclusive as is possible in this kind of debates. Referring to Hopp’s works for more thorough argumentation in favor of a “Husserlian” nonconceptualism, I would here just like to point out that Hopp’s arguments seem to leave room to a McDowellian counter-argument, according to which this kind of content is, anyway, on this side of the space of reason, and we can rationally grasp them only when, so to say, accompanied by conceptual contents—that is, not until the light of reason shines on the contents of our blind experiences.

To escape blindness, I do not think we need to run from the rational light of conceptual contents, but rather learn to appreciate the (perhaps blinding) visibility of nonconceptual contents. Even if one manages to show that seeing is

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<sup>36</sup> Hopp, *Knowledge and Perception*, 212.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Hopp, “Husserl on sensation, perception, and interpretation”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 38, n. 2, 2008, 219-245; “Conceptualism and the myth of the given,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, n. 3, 2009, 363-385; “Is seeing intentional? A response to Travis.”

nonconceptual, if one does not also manage to show that cases of *conscious* nonepistemic seeing occur aside from their involvement with cases of verification or recognition, the suspicion that there is no way for something to be properly given in a nonconceptual manner remains alive and well. One could still say that nonconceptual seeing has no rational epistemic relevance: it is either a theoretical or a mythical *positum*. In a way, the conceptualist *corollarium* to the above understanding of the relationship between conceptual and perceptual content could be that, although perceptual contents make an object present, they do not make it seen.<sup>38</sup> Of course, we can acknowledge that a perception offers evidence in favor of a belief, but only insofar it works for a belief and matches with one belief or another. Whatever falls short of “matching” with some belief is even not able to enter our conscious view.

To counter this “conceptualist” challenge, I will now proceed with a more careful analysis of different layers of perceptual experience and of their respective contents. After that, we will be able to go back to the evaluation of my thesis according to which my recollection of having seen the teapot while I spoke with Lucy *could* be a case of current conceptualization of data collected through what, following Dretske, I will call “simple seeing”. Only then will we be able to appreciate the paramount role of fully nonconceptual seeing for our understanding of epistemic states.

## 5 A Husserlian refinement of Dretske’s simple seeing

“Simple seeing” is an expression that, in contemporary debates in philosophy and epistemology of perception, is inevitably connected with the work of Fred Dretske. However, there is a prominent antecedent of both Dretske’s proposal and the debate concerning how a form of simple and nonconceptual seeing can contribute to our epistemic and, thus, conceptual life. The (closest)<sup>39</sup> forerunner to Dretske is Edmund Husserl and his reflections on the relationship between perception and knowledge, which can be traced back, at the very least, to his

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<sup>38</sup> I do not believe this is a view McDowell, to speak of one author, would easily accept. A rigorous conceptualist would rather argue that all presence is already conceptual or conceptualizable for us. This makes the situation even worse, though. Indeed, I do not see how such a position can consistently maintain that there is something that is nonconceptualized, if not inferentially or hypothetically, thus keeping within the realm of a Davidsonian coherentism.

<sup>39</sup> I say “closest”, because it is clear that the whole history of (Western?) philosophy is filled with debates concerning how concepts impinge on our awareness and knowledge of the world and vice versa. Husserl’s reflections, together with Heidegger’s and other phenomenologists’ confrontations with them, could probably be considered as the last episode within the “purely” philosophical realm, that is, on this side of psychological and linguistic analyses and theories, before the “analytic” debate.

*Logical Investigations*. Indeed, although the most relevant or, at least, celebrated works of Husserl concerning nonconceptual experience are those concerning passive syntheses<sup>40</sup> and prepredicative experience<sup>41</sup>, even as early as his *Logical Investigations* Husserl had already offered rich discussions on a form of nonconceptual perception, that he calls “plain perception” (*schlichte Wahrnehmung*),<sup>42</sup> and analyzes its relevance for knowledge. Husserl’s analyses allow us to differentiate layers of “purely sensuous” perceptions and perceptual contents. Moreover, Husserl discusses the possibility of a “reduction to the real stock” (*Reduktion auf den reellen Bestand*) of our perceptual experiences that, as we will see, is particularly useful to understand what and how Dretske’s simple seeing can really *give* us something neither mythically, nor only hypothetically.

Dretske’s concept of simple seeing has four essential features, two negative and two positive ones.

S simply seeing X

- (A) is compatible with S having no beliefs about X;
- (B) is compatible with S not noticing X;
- (C) implies S differentiates X from the rest of her visual field;
- (D) implies X appearing to S.

I will now consider the first feature before turning to the others. I will thus try to carve out an understanding of simple seeing that clearly shows what it can do and what it cannot, while considering some of the objections Dretske has received. In this way, it will be possible to evaluate whether the version of the story I offered above can reasonably be accepted, and what it can help us understand about our relationship with the sensuous world.

## 5.1 Seeing without believing

In order to understand what the first feature of simple seeing mentioned above means, we ought to clarify what it means to have beliefs about something. First of all, Dretske’s beliefs are clearly propositional attitudes. As such, they imply concepts, which constitute elements of propositions. It follows that the

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<sup>40</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten, 1918–1926*, Husserliana XI, ed. Margot Fleischer (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

<sup>41</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe (Hamburg: Claassen & Goverts, 1948).

<sup>42</sup> The most usual translation of this Husserlian expression, and the one present in the English version of the *Logical Investigations*, is “straightforward perception”. I will, anyway, prefer to use the term “plain” because I find it adheres more closely to the original, and is also more apt to express the idea that perception occurs on a single level of experience.



Dretskean understanding of belief complies with the generality constraint. Beliefs, even when they refer to particulars, have states-of-affairs as their contents, that is, they intend particulars as being such-and-so—including cases of “being existent”, in the specific sense of existence as a predicate. Simple seeing, to the contrary, does not even *take* its object to exist. This does not properly mean that simple seeing is neutral with regard to the existence of its object, but rather that, for simple seeing, there is no question of existence or non-existence.

Dretske has also emphasized that his theory does not require the subject to have no beliefs at all. Dretske rather claims that it is possible to not have a belief *about* the seen object:

[S]eeing X is not constituted by, nor does it require, the having of beliefs about X.<sup>43</sup>

In this way Dretske stresses that whatever one believes about a certain object is not relevant for one's seeing such an object. Although this characterization of a basic form of seeing could sound as if it is commonsense, powerful attacks towards it have been carried out by Aldrich,<sup>44</sup> Close,<sup>45</sup> Pitson,<sup>46</sup> and Demircioglu.<sup>47</sup> While none of these critics seem to be particularly concerned with conceptualism, they do not find it plausible, or otherwise sufficiently proven, to say that seeing can happen without any form of belief concerning the specific object that is seen.

To realize what Dretske precisely has in mind, we should consider an unfortunate misstep he committed during one of his expositions on simple seeing. Indeed, one of the examples Dretske proposes to support his thesis that seeing is independent of belief is quite misleading:

[N]ot only could S see his aunt and not believe that she was his aunt, but he might not believe that she was a woman, nor even that she was a human being. Depending on the lighting conditions, his attentiveness, and a host of other variables, he might mistake her for a mannequin, a shadow, or any one of a number of different things.<sup>48</sup>

As Close rightly observes,<sup>49</sup> in such a case, S seems to have a *particular* visual belief about what he sees. To say that S can see his aunt as “any one of a number

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<sup>43</sup> Fred Dretske, “Dretske's replies”, in *Dretske and His Critics*, 181.

<sup>44</sup> Virgil Aldrich, “Seeing and knowing,” *Journal of Philosophy* 67, n. 23, 1970, 994–1006; “Visual noticing without believing,” *Mind* 83, n. 332, 1974, 512–533.

<sup>45</sup> Daryl Close, “What is non-epistemic seeing?” *Mind* 85 (April 1976): 161–170; “More on non-epistemic seeing,” *Mind* 89 (January 1980): 99–105.

<sup>46</sup> A. E. Pitson, “Basic seeing,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (September 1984): 121–130.

<sup>47</sup> Erhan Demircioglu, “Dretske on non-epistemic seeing,” *Theoria* 83, n. 4, 364– 393.

<sup>48</sup> Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Close, “What is non-epistemic seeing?” 168.

of different things" does, indeed, not rule out, but rather implies, that any possible vision would imply some belief or another about the aunt in question. Hence, although Dretske does show that no particular belief is necessary, he does not succeed in showing that no belief whatsoever is at all necessary. In other words, in this case he was not able to show that simple seeing can occur in the absence of any belief whatsoever.

We could understand the aunt-example as a slip of the proverbial tongue by Dretske. Yet, I mention it here because it allows us better to understand what the real, and problematic, view of Dretske is. In fact, Close himself does not insist on the example of the aunt. Instead, Close concentrates on another notorious example from Dretske; one that is much more decisive for Dretske's overall theory of simple seeing:

Why do we say to people, as we sometimes do, 'But you must have seen it'? What is there about the situation that prompts such a remark? It is certainly not that the person already believes he saw it (whatever it happens to be). Quite the contrary; he does not believe he saw it, cannot remember having seen it, or is simply dubious of whether he saw anything at all of the kind in question. Generally speaking, we say such things in the face of a person's disbelief; we say it when we are convinced that, despite what the person thought he saw, or whether he thought he saw anything at all, the physical and physiological conditions were such that the object must have looked some way to him. 'You must have seen that cufflink; you were staring right at it.' Whatever response this allegation may prompt, it is not refuted by an appeal to ignorance: 'I did not notice it,' or 'The drawer looked empty to me'. He may have seen the cuff link without noticing it; he may have seen it without it looking to him as though there was something in the drawer. What would refute the allegation is something quite different. 'No, I did not look into the drawer', 'The cuff link was not there when I looked', or 'No, I had my eyes closed all the time'.<sup>50</sup>

It is easy to see that this famous "cuff link case" entails an element, indeed a basic one, for supporting the idea of simple seeing. This idea is also present in the story I started this article with: namely, we find here the idea that one can see something without realizing it, that is, without any thematic awareness of it.

As a matter of fact, Dretske characterizes simple seeing in a way that may remind of Sellars's distinction between sensing and taking.<sup>51</sup> According to the

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<sup>50</sup> Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, "Some reflections on perceptual consciousness," in *Crosscurrents in Phenomenology*, ed. Ronald Bruzina and B. W. Wilshire (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 169-185.

terminology mainly developed in *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*,<sup>52</sup> we could say that simple seeing delivers to subject S an overflow of information about X, but S does not properly extract any of such information by simply seeing X. In order to extract information, one would need a digitalization of the original stash of data. Such digitalization, as Dretske poignantly argues in *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, inevitably goes hand in hand with some loss of the information that the stash gained by simple seeing contains. Put simply, Dretske wants to mark the difference between becoming aware of something and taking it as being thus-and-so. He would like to preserve visual content that is prior to any selection of the information it contains—a kind of zero-loss recording, as it were. The problem with his account is that he seems to leave the mere visual awareness of the object unqualified and unattentive, thus making it possible to seriously doubt if one does ever actually have this kind of visual experience. Otherwise, even assuming such experiences occur, one could argue that it is hard to realize what kind of content they specifically have. To achieve an understanding of both the possibility and the content of simple seeing, I think Dretske's analyses are not really sufficient. To this end, we shall attempt to integrate his proposal with some Husserlian ideas and insights.

### 5.1.1 From simple seeing to plain perception

As we saw, a fundamental element of the Generality Constraint is that it requires the capacity to dissemble the content through which an object is intended.<sup>53</sup> This means that, basically, the Generality Constraint implies the compositionality of content. In this regard, Dretske offers a remark that makes it as clear as possible that simple seeing is not subject to the Generality Constraint:

There is [...] a significant difference between seeing the round X and seeing the roundness of X (its shape).<sup>54</sup>

To anyone familiar with Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, such a statement will certainly appear similar to what Husserl says about the difference between plain perception and categorial perception. In a way, the differences Husserl draws between these two kinds of perception is akin to one of the differences between conceptual and nonconceptual experience that has been at the centre of many philosophical debates for the past 40 years. What is more, Husserl's analyses can

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<sup>52</sup> See Fred Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

<sup>53</sup> In a recent article, Cahen and Musholt have argued for a distinction between conceptual and compositional contents. I cannot delve into this issue, here, but, as it will become clear, a similar idea lies also at the basis of my proposal. See Arnon Cahen and Kristina Musholt, "Perception, nonconceptual content, and immunity to error through misidentification," *Inquiry* 60, 7 (2017): 703–723.

<sup>54</sup> Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge, and Belief*, 98.

greatly help clarify the situation with regard to how different kinds of perception are structured and what they “properly” *give*. Husserl writes:

In the sense of the *narrower*, ‘*sensuous*’ perception, an object is directly apprehended or is itself present, if it is set up in an act of perception in a *straightforward* (*schlichter*) manner. What this means is this: that the object is also an *immediately given object* in the sense that, as *this object perceived with this definite objective content*, it is not *constituted* in relational, connective, or otherwise articulated acts, *acts founded on other acts which bring other objects to perception*. Sensuous objects are present in perception *at a single act-level*: they do not need to be constituted in many-rayed fashion in acts of higher level, whose objects are set up for them by way of other objects, already constituted in other acts.<sup>55</sup>

As we can see in this passage, in the *Logical Investigations* Husserl distinguishes between single-rayed and multi-rayed acts. To be single-rayed means that there is only one single act that covers the totality of the intended content. On the contrary, in multi-rayed acts, the total objectuality,—that is, normally, a state-of-affairs—is meant in a plurality of distinct acts—acts that could also occur independently of one another. Each act has, therefore, its own sense, that is intelligible also without any help of other acts, while the total objectualities meant by multi-rayed acts obey the compositionality principle.

In the *Logical Investigations*, this distinction corresponds with the distinction between propositional, on the one hand, and nominal acts, demonstratives and indexicals, on the other. However, single-rayedness is not only a property of linguistic or thought acts. It is also used to define perception. We could even say that perception is the paradigmatic case of single-rayed acts.

The fact that perception is a single-rayed act implies that perceptual content does not present the different parts or aspects of the object separately from one another.<sup>56</sup> The lack of a separate presentations of parts within a perceptual

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<sup>55</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol. 2, trans. J. N. Findlay (London and New York: Routledge, 1970), 282.

<sup>56</sup> I have to leave aside a thorough consideration of what “parts” within a phenomenologico-mereologico-Husserlian analysis of perception should mean, because this would require another full paper. For the sake of the present one, a very schematic presentation as the following one should suffice: perceptual contents always refer to whole objects, while perceptual content parts can refer either to adumbrations or to aspects of an object. Adumbrations correspond to object’s sides, while aspects correspond to object’s properties. Finally, on the side of the object, sides are independent parts (for instance, the head of a chicken), while properties are dependent parts of the object (for instance, the smell of a chicken). This implies that content-parts cannot become the full content of a perception, as long as perception is considered to refer to something “thing-like”. In order to become the “proper”, as it were, object of a perception, we need a kind of perceptual experience that does not see aspects as referring to

content makes it clearly impossible to say that the latter complies with the Generality Constraint and, thus, it should not count as conceptual. This is not the whole story, though.

In the case of perception, single-rayedness means that a perceptual act has a content that corresponds to a whole object, while no specific intention is directed towards any of its parts. One could thus be inclined to think that, from a Husserlian perspective, plain perceptions are acts that intend an object with no awareness of any internal articulation and structure of such object. This is not the case.

The fact that perception is plain, and that the parts of the object are not seen *as* parts, does not mean that the object, in plain perception, is intended in a kind of monolithic, flat, inarticulate way. Though single-rayed, a perceptual act's content is made of a plurality of parts. However,—and this is the decisive difference with categorial (that is, roughly, conceptual) acts—such parts are not properly *noticed*, in other words, they are not experienced thematically, in a kind of abstraction from the whole they inhabit.

From several remarks he makes, it is clear that Husserl, by stressing that perception is a single-rayed, that is to say, non-compositional, act, is trying to rule any *conscious* and *intellectual* synthetic activity on behalf of the subject out from plain perception. With that said, he also calls attention to the fact that

Closer analysis shows that even a continuous perceptual flux involves a fusion of part-acts in one act, rather than a peculiar act founded upon such part-acts. [...] In straightforward perception we say that the whole object is explicitly given, while each of its parts (in the widest sense of 'parts') is implicitly given. The sum total of objects that can be explicitly or implicitly given in straightforward percepts constitutes the most widely conceived sphere of sensible objects.<sup>57</sup>

The idea that the parts are given *implicitly*, could suggest that Husserl is defending a view similar to McDowell, who claims that we can, indeed, have contents that are not properly conceptualized, but are necessarily

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properties of things. We will see that, indeed, this is what simple seeing should be considered as doing.

A further complication of Husserl's analyses of perception comes from the fact that properties are also considered to be given through adumbrations. To understand in which sense this is the case, one could simply think about Sellars (1997)'s necktie. With that said, color adumbrations do clearly not refer to sides of the color, but merely to further abstract parts of its appearance, that could in principle occur also in other systems of appearances.

<sup>57</sup> Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol. 2, 284.

conceptualizable.<sup>58</sup> In this sense, no content can really be nonconceptual. It can only be “latently” conceptual, as it were.

Husserl’s idea of perceptual objects as given through a kind of “fusional acts-whole”, which he later more closely investigates under the title of “passive syntheses”, could, indeed, seem to agree with McDowell’s idea that our “nature” works in a way, according to which, what is presented to us, can always become conceptually developed and understood.<sup>59</sup> This implies a kind of sub-personal on the part of our sensitivity that is, as it were, isomorphic with our conceptual capacities. This is, in a sense, what Husserl explicitly tries to work out in his genetic phenomenology, but had actually been occupied with since the very beginning of his “descriptive phenomenology” of arithmetical and geometrical concepts.<sup>60</sup>

With that said, we should not mix up takings with percepts, or conceptual with perceptual contents. In plain seeing, parts of the perceived object are included in the content, but not intended. They are not meant or “given”, *per se*. To the contrary, in the case of contents of propositional intentions one always intends the parts as potentially detached from the given whole.

So, while propositional contents are constituted on the basis of distinct contents, that is to say, the total content is dependent on the content of its parts, in the case of perceptual content the whole is not the product of parts previously given in independence of one another. Even if one can focus one’s attention on a part of the object, the perceptual content as such keeps on referring to the whole object. Since a move from whole to parts *as* parts of the whole is a fundamental condition for a content to comply with the Generality Constraint, it is clear that plain perception does not satisfy such a criterion and, therefore, it cannot be considered conceptual.

This, of course, by itself, does not deny that there can always be a partial correspondence between conceptual and perceptual contents. Keeping McDowellian suggestions in mind, we could say that plain perception occurs thanks to sub-personal syntheses, and they prepare the ground for our conceptual takings. Only after having been conceptually enlightened, perceptual contents become properly conscious.

If we want to comprehend how to resist this McDowellian view, and claim that the pre-conceptual, or the non-conceptual, do not only lie on a sub-personal level, we need to investigate the various elements of perception a bit further.

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<sup>58</sup> See John McDowell, “Conceptual capacities in perception,” in *Kreativität*, ed. Günther Abel (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> See John McDowell, *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press).

<sup>60</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Philosophie der Arithmetik. Mit ergänzenden Texten, 1890–1901*, Husserliana XII, ed. Lothar Eley (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970); *Studien zur Arithmetik und Geometrie. Texte aus dem Nachlass, 1886–1901*, ed. Ingeborg Strohmeier (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983).

### 5.1.2 From Typological to Morphological Perception

The phenomenology of plain perception shows that, at first sight, perceptual content is not propositional, to wit, it does not deliver object “compositionally”. In this regard, although it can be somehow isomorphic with regard to conceptual contents, it is appropriate to say that perceptual contents are not propositional. This, however, does not rule out the possibility that some kind of conceptual apprehension of the object occurs in perception. Indeed, in the same way that an object is straightforwardly perceived as a whole with no thematic awareness of the inner articulation that allows it to appear, it is possible that the object elicits in the subject its classification, for instance, as a giraffe, and thus rouses a series of dispositions of S towards it. What is more, this may occur even while S has no consciousness of such a classification. S automatically identifies X as Y, although S does not entertain the content “X is Y”. In other words, this kind of recognitional activity does not need to follow the generality constraint in the strict sense, because, in order for S to see X as Y in this “pre-propositional” sense, S does not need to be able to *think* of X as B and of A as Y.<sup>61</sup>

This kind of “mechanism” is something Husserl is keenly aware of. In his later writings in particular, he tried to investigate and better understand this mechanism. Its most advanced delineation and development is to be found in what, among Husserl’s scholars, is known as *Typentheorie*. This constitutes a kind of refined, and, in Husserl’s own view, *transcendental*, advancement of Hume’s (or, more generally, empiricism’s) theory of how association and habit shape (parts of) our experience.

With all that said, although plain perception could allow, and could even normally be accompanied by, typological recognition, this does not mean that we necessarily recognize things. Dretske, with his concept of simple seeing, would rather like to insist on simple seeing being a necessary condition for recognition—and, I believe, Husserl would not disagree on this point.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that McDowell explicitly considers this kind of recognitional capacity to be nonconceptual: see McDowell, “Conceptual capacities in perception.”

<sup>62</sup> As a matter of fact, within the frameworks of the *Logical Investigations*, recognitive apprehensions would still fall under the genus of “categorical intuition”. However, later, in order to account for cases of pre-linguistic, and somehow pre-conscious, recognitive capacities, he introduces said theory of types. See: Dieter Lohmar, *Erfahrung und kategoriales Denken. Hume, Kant und Husserl über vorprädikative Erfahrung und prädikative Erkenntnis* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998); Jagna Brudzińska, “Type as experiential structure from a phenomenological point of view,” *Dialogue and Universalism* 4, n. 99, 2015: 101–115. To some extent, Husserl’s *Typentheorie* could be considered as a much more refined version of later ideas such as that of Dummett’s “proto-concepts” (see Michael Dummett, “Thought and perception: The views of two philosophical innovators,” in *The Analytic Tradition: Philosophical Quarterly Monographs, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), as well as, perhaps more interestingly, but also arguably, as an anticipation of Millikan’s biosemantics (see Ruth Millikan, “Biosemantics,” *Journal of Philosophy* 86, (July 1898), 281–97.

This explains in which sense beliefs (in a quite broad sense) should be excluded from simple seeing, namely, as *ingredients* of simple seeing. In the picture of simple seeing we are trying to work out, both beliefs in the sense of states of mind that have propositional content, and beliefs in the sense of near-automatic classifications of objects of perception, entertain contents that stretch beyond what is simply seen *on the spot*.

Still, Husserl's observations concerning plain perception also remind us that even the simplest kinds of external objects are perceptually multi-faceted, and that, as he says in his famous *Thing and Space* lectures,<sup>63</sup> several parts of them are not-properly given. Indeed, in any thing-perception, some parts are hidden. In other words, in any thing-perception, some parts are not sensuously given, or, if you prefer, there are no sensations that correspond to them in the specific experiential content at work from time to time. However, this does not mean that the improperly given parts of the objects are posited by the intellect, nor by imagination or memory.<sup>64</sup> As we will see, it is rather job of amodal completion.

One could say that our perceptual system entails more than sense-data, already on a level even lower than that of typological apprehension of objects, to wit, of pre-conceptual or pre-linguistic recognition. There is a level that we could refer to as the merely morphological apprehension of the objects, in which the content of sensations is given together with a, more or less precise, overall *Gestalt* of the object such sensations pertain to.<sup>65</sup>

It seems therefore to be reasonable to assert that this layer of perceptual experience does not even involve beliefs in a typological sense. It would, indeed, be problematic for me *visually* to recognize something as of a certain kind, that is, to classify it, without an, even having an approximate, idea of its overall shape. I wonder, indeed, what I would be supposed to recognize, in such a case, since I would have no awareness of *anything*.

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<sup>63</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Ding und Raum. Vorlesungen 1907*, Husserliana XVI, ed. Ulrich Claesges (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).

<sup>64</sup> See Kevin Mulligan, "Perception," in *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, ed. Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith (Cambridge Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Besides Gurwitsch's in-depth and original development of views that put together Gestalt-psychology and Husserlian phenomenology (see: Aaron Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964; *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), on the relationship between Husserlian phenomenology and Gestalt-psychology, see: Barry Smith, *Structure and Gestalt: Philosophy and Literature in Austria-Hungary and Her Successor States* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1981); Luciano Boi, "Phénoménologie et m'ér'ologie de la perception spatiale: de Husserl aux théoriciens de la Gestalt," in *Rediscovering Phenomenology: Phenomenological Essays on Mathematical Beings, Physical Reality, Perception and Consciousness*, ed. Luciano Boi, Pierre Kerszberg, and Frédéric Patras (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 33–66; Uljana Feest, "Gestalt psychology, frontloading phenomenology, and psychophysics," *Synthese* 198 (Suppl. 9, 2019), 2153–2173.



Once we acknowledge a layer of perceptual experience that is both preconceptual and pre-typological, we need to understand whether this could be enough to overcome Close's objection to Dretske's simple seeing. Indeed, Close has objected that, in cases like that of the cuff link mentioned above, it is difficult to claim that one doesn't have any visual belief at all about what one has failed to recognize as the cuff link. To counter Close's objection, it could be enough to say that, the first time S looked into the drawer, S merely morphologically saw the cuff link, but this morphological seeing did not ripen into any typological belief about it. One could counter this, though, by claiming that a kind of belief must have been there—namely that *that* has such and such a form. Let us call this a “morphological belief”, that, similarly to typological beliefs, happens subpersonally without requiring propositional consciousness. In order appropriately to evaluate this counter-argument, we need some further clarification as regards morphological perception.

First, we need to point out that morphological perception can remain quite vague, and, in a sense, it can leave a big part of what has been perceived underdetermined. Recalling an idea from Marr's theory of vision,<sup>66</sup> we could speak of a  $2^1/2D$  level of vision, which precedes that of fully defined 3D vision. In this sense, assuming simply the idea of a  $2^1/2D$  presentation of objects, while leaving aside the entirety of Marr's theory, we could say that our object-perception is always of an object as somehow 3-dimensional, but it does not necessarily require that we “amodally complete” the full shape of it.<sup>67</sup> The case of the cuff link in the drawer is a good example, in this sense. We can, indeed, assume that the cuff link is surrounded by many other objects, and also that is partially covered by some of them. So, it may be that not all appearing parts of what is in the drawer elicit an amodal completion. Would this mean that the cuff link has not been seen?

Of course, one could say so. However, in this case, one would equate seeing with amodal completion. Only later will I be fully able to argue for a form of seeing that requires neither typological recognition nor morphological completion. As for now, we only need to exclude that amodal completion requires, or goes hand in hand with, belief about what one is amodally

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<sup>66</sup> See David Marr, *Vision. A computational investigation into the human representation and processing of visual information* (New York: Freeman, 1982).

<sup>67</sup> As known, Marr's model aims at describing the causal processes that underpin and realize visual processing. Therefore, as such, they cannot be straightforwardly accepted within a phenomenological framework. Within the present context, I refer to Marr's ideas not to insert his theory into the phenomenological picture of non-conceptual givenness I am trying to depict here, but rather because I believe that the idea made famous by him of a  $2^1/2D$  level of vision could be considered as consistent with the partial indeterminacy of thing-perception as it emerges from phenomenological analyses. Within the present context, therefore, Marr's model should obviously be altered as if it concerned phenomenal consciousness. Of course, there are issues with this, but I believe the pages that follow will be able to demonstrate the benefits of such an alteration.

completing. In this regard, we should notice that, if one were to assert that the amodal completion of the cuff link is a matter of belief, in the sense that morphological beliefs provide something essential to seeing the cuff link, one should then be ready to admit that it is also the case in basically all episodes of stereoscopic perception. When I see the *full* right side of a donkey I only *believe* that I see a 3-dimensional object, that is to say, I see a 3-dimensional object only thanks to the beliefs that I have about the non-appearing side of it.

I think that, in this way, we could end up stretching the concept of belief a bit too far. However, I am not interested in discussing, or criticizing, this option, here, which is possibly much less absurd than it seems at first sight. What is important, within the present discussion, is only that such a usage of the concept of belief would make the whole discussion on the relationship between perception and belief as good as superfluous.

This does not mean that I deny that, for instance, past experiences, or even some phylogenetically inherited patterns of amodal completion do not play any role in our morphological apprehension of the world. On the contrary, as we will see, I think it is even possible to *see* that there is *a part* of the sensuousphysical world that lies on this side of any amodal completion. This should not necessarily lead us to assert that amodal completion is a matter of belief, though. Indeed, even if amodal completion could be wrong, thus being subject to accuracy conditions,<sup>68</sup> the mistake would lie in the completion itself rather than in the belief about the object the completion delivers.

One could argue that in amodal completion we intend X as being a part of Y, while it is a part of W. This, however, implies that I can intend the part as part, and this is contrary to what we have seen plain perception can do. In amodal completion, we do not have any object to *abstract* parts from. The process, in amodal completion, is from part to whole, as it were, and not the opposite. In this sense, generality constraint should not be considered as holding in morphological perception. Indeed, in amodal completion I am not able to mean the whole without the part on the basis of which I apprehend it. So, I do not see the whole and then focus on a part. I would, rather, see the part and “construct” the whole. If I “immediately” see the part as part, however, it means that I already have a whole in view that precedes the amodal completion on the basis of the given part.

All that said, it seems quite clear to me that amodal completion lies, in the Sellarsian jargon, on this side of the space of reasons, although it is questionable if it can properly be situated in the space of causes, or if we should rather think

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<sup>68</sup> I will leave the case of hallucination and dreams aside, because this would require another whole cluster of considerations.

of it in a kind of intermediate realm. We will come back to this issue at the end of the paper.<sup>69</sup>

## 5.2 Conscious differentiation without noticing

One of the two positive features of simple seeing we mentioned above, consists in the differentiation of an object (or multiple objects) within one's visual field. Dretske is very clear on this point:

S sees<sub>n</sub>  $D = D$  is visually differentiated from its immediate environment by  $S$ <sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, Dretske also insists on the fact that simple seeing does not require noticing, and this means that, in order to simply see X, S does not need to focus on X, does not need properly to watch X, and does not need to pay attention to X. Moreover, S does not even need to react to X. That is to say, simple seeing is on "this side" of any discriminatory response, that is to say, of typological recognition intended as a kind of subpersonal mechanism.

In general, we can say that, for Dretske, noticing seems to necessarily imply some kind of belief, at least of a proto-conceptual type. Since simple seeing is independent of any kind of belief about or towards X, simple seeing is also independent of noticing. By endorsing an extreme view of simple seeing that excludes even a minimal case of noticing, Dretske wants to exclude *any form* of properly cognitive operation from simple seeing. Recognizing, categorizing, and individuating X would all clearly be forms of *understanding X*—and Dretske wants to dig out a form of seeing that does not imply *any form* of understanding—including uncounscious forms of understanding. To a certain extent, even subpersonal forms of cognition are denied, because this would risk confusing the delivery of the senses with that of "subjective" sources. Seeing *happens* to the conscious subject, and it even represents the starting point for her own cognitive activities. For Dretske, however, noticing is also a kind of cognitive activity, and, in this sense, it requires more than simply seeing. It requires some form of appreciation of X as being different from the rest of the visual field, and this necessarily seems to imply the formation of a belief that X is different from the rest of the visual field.

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<sup>69</sup> The need for an intermediate level, between conceptual and nonconceptual, in order to overcome some *impasse* in the current debate on conceptualism, has been very poignantly shown by Pacherie, who also made explicit reference to Dretske's account of seeing: see Elisabeth Pacherie, "Levels of perceptual content," *Philosophical Studies* 100, n. 4 (2000), 237–254. Pacherie proposes an account of this intermediate layer that basically corresponds to that of morphological perception as we are discussing here. It seems to me that, unfortunately, that Pacherie's proposal has not been much considered in the ongoing debates.

<sup>70</sup> Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, 20.

If we follow Dretske's train of thought, then it seems that if S is attentive to X, S is not simply *given* X as different from the rest of the visual field. Instead, S is also engaged with this difference, that is, with X not being not-X. S is somehow keeping the identity of X "in view", or "under observation", and is trying to make something out of its original "mere" differentiation—that is, a differentiation that is originally unnoticed, and "simply received."<sup>71</sup> We need, now, to understand whether this negative requirement for having cases of simple seeing should be understood as also excluding cases of morphological perception and whether, if this were the case, we should not exclude also perceptual positionality *tout-court*.

Erhan Demircioglu has argued that, if Dretske's account of simple seeing excludes even an undemanding sense of belief acquisition that corresponds with noticing, the kind of visual differentiation Dretske requires for simple seeing would be *not* phenomenal.<sup>72</sup> In other words, without any attention whatsoever, no phenomenal content is possible. However, as we have seen, Dretske attributes phenomenality to simple seeing—and such a feature is fundamental to differentiate Dretske's from a merely causal account of seeing. Indeed, Dretske has insisted that a merely causal "visual" relationship with an object is definitely not able to account for the fact that we *see* something.<sup>73</sup>

It is clear that, if Demircioglu's critique is correct, Dretske's account of simple seeing should be considered as untenable. There are different ways to counter Demircioglu's arguments against simple seeing without noticing, though. First of all, we should point out that, in his article, Demircioglu appeals to Bermudez' "minimal account of concept possession at the nonlinguistic level, on which the possession of the concept *F* amounts to no more than the capacity appropriately

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<sup>71</sup> Pitson considers Dretske to be "torn between, on the one hand, treating S's visual differentiation of x as something that *happens* to S, something he undergoes (x's appearing to him, and appearing in a particular way); and, on the other hand, treating it as a capacity of S to do something" (Pitson, "Basic seeing," 127). I think, however, that Dretske quite unmistakably leans toward the first option, and he does not look as particularly torn, to me. I would say that "S being appeared by x" is the most consistent way to read Dretske's simple seeing—forgiving any misleading phrases on his part. Indeed, the assertion that "*D* is visually differentiated from its immediate environment by *S*" could sound as if the differentiation is something S *does*. We can, however, interpret this as an achievement of sub-personal systems of S.

<sup>72</sup> Demircioglu, "Dretske on non-epistemic seeing," 379.

<sup>73</sup> He even goes so far, in his response to some critiques by Virgil Aldrich, to assert that "[i]f it is found that the eyes played no essential role in this process, if light is unnecessary, then so much the worse for the standard scientific account of *how* we see" (Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays*, 111). In this way, Dretske wants to emphasize that the issue at stake, for him, is not the physical nor the psychological process that allows, or even produces, simple seeing, but rather the conceptual—and, we should probably say, also phenomenological—differentiation between different layers of our experience, and their contents.

to distinguish Fs from non-Fs and to act appropriately in the presence/absence of Fs".<sup>74</sup>

According to this definition, it is obvious that nonconceptual discrimination requires what we could call "typological capacities", that is, the kind of capacities that allow us to see things as tokens of types, of which we spoke above. To the contrary, simple seeing, lying below the level of typological apprehension, requires no discriminatory response towards X.

By denying the notion that simple seeing requires, or implies, recognitive capacities and discriminatory responses, Dretske intends to avoid (merely) functionalistic accounts of perception, to wit, accounts of perception that imply even a minimal form of concept possession. In this regard, Dretske makes it clear that there has been an excessive behavioristic zeal that has urged scholars to reduce all psychology to behavior; that is, to identify "all psychological states to functional states of the organism".<sup>75</sup> Dretske's confrontation with some of his critics, and particularly with Heil<sup>76</sup> and Aldrich,<sup>77</sup> allows us to understand that his main concern in affirming simple seeing as not implying discrimination, is to establish a layer of experience that is prior to, or independent of, any operational reaction on behalf of the subject.

There are several reasons to resist functionalistic accounts of perception. On the one hand, a functionalist kind of recognitive capacities could be effective even in the absence of phenomenology (for instance, in cases of 'blind sight').<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, discriminative responses could be missing in cases where the subject is simply uninterested in what she is seeing and, therefore, does not show any reaction towards it, although she has recognized it.

This being the situation, we still need to get a precise picture of what simple seeing consists of. We understand it is below the level of typological perception, but what about the morphological layer? Another objection from Demircioglu is very helpful for understanding what simple seeing properly means as well as its relationship with morphological perception. Demircioglu aptly points out that

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<sup>74</sup> José Bermudez, "The distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Brian McLaughlin, Ansgar Beckermann, and Sven Walter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 470.

<sup>75</sup> Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays*, 103.

<sup>76</sup> Dretske, "Dretske's replies."

<sup>77</sup> Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays*, 97–112.

<sup>78</sup> That the minimal kind of concept possession is too demanding for simple seeing should also be clear by the fact that, according to Bermudez' definition quoted above, minimal concept possession would allow to react even to the absence of Fs. Can simple seeing deliver the information that Fs are not there? To answer this question thoroughly, we should carry out a discussion of negative evidence, negative state of affairs, and so forth. This would definitely go beyond the limits of this paper. I can just say that, since even a form of plain perception as the one portrayed above is relative to objects, and not to states-of-affairs, it would be odd to maintain that simple seeing is relative to states-of-affairs.

there are clear cases of visual noticing and clear cases of visual unnoticing, but there are also clearly unclear cases.<sup>79</sup> To make his point, Demircioglu refers to the example of the long-distance driver, proposed by Armstrong:

If you have driven for a very long distance without break, you may have had experience of a curious state of automatism, which can occur in these conditions. One can suddenly “come to” and realize that one has driven for long distances without being aware of what one was doing, or, indeed, without being aware of anything. One has kept the car on the road, used the break and the clutch perhaps, yet all without any awareness of what one was doing.

Now if we consider this case, it is obvious that *in some sense* mental processes are still going on when one is in such an automatic state. Unless one’s will was still operating in some way, and unless one was still perceiving in some way, the car would not still be on the road. Yet, of course, *something* mental is lacking.<sup>80</sup>

Demircioglu comments on Armstrong’s example in the following way:

[T]here [...] seems to be a distinction between his failure to notice that distant tree in [the long-distance driver’s] visual field, which has nothing to do with the way he drives, and his failure to “notice” the car moving just ahead of his truck. What seems to explain how the driver succeeds in driving the truck without running into the car ahead is that there is a sense in which while being on auto-pilot, he still notices some of the objects in his visual field such as cars in the vicinity.<sup>81</sup>

I think Demircioglu is right in claiming that the long-distance driver can be considered as “unnoticing” some objects, while noticing others. This, however, should not be placed in contrast with the general thesis of Dretske. All Dretske wants us to recognize is that, it is possible to see something while not noticing it. He does not claim all seeing happens without noticing, nor does he argue that one can have a totally unnoticed visual field.<sup>82</sup> As a matter of fact, Demircioglu himself seems to acknowledge that the long-distance driver’s visual field comprehends something unnoticed: the distant tree.

To counter Demircioglu’s critique, it could, then, be enough to remember what we have said in the previous section about simple seeing implying no belief: what characterizes simple seeing is having no belief *about X*, not having

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<sup>79</sup> Demircioglu, “Dretske on non-epistemic seeing,” 371.

<sup>80</sup> David Malet Armstrong, *The Nature of Mind and Other Essays* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 12.

<sup>81</sup> Demircioglu, “Dretske on non-epistemic seeing,” 371.

<sup>82</sup> This would be *my* claim, as we will see below. I am not sure Dretske would share it.

no belief in general. Likewise, it is not required that there is no attention at all, but simply no attention towards X in order for X to be seen.

All that being said, the long-distance driver's case urges us to realize that the Dretskean account seen so far has not been able to tell us how the mere differentiation required by simple seeing can really be kept apart from noticing. The example of the long-distance driver shows us that to say that simple seeing does not require any attention, is not sufficient to clarify what kind of content simple seeing has. Indeed, it leaves open the possibility of unattended-but-recognized objects. In this regard, we need to remark that Dretske's rebuttal to functionalistic accounts of simple seeing can end up being partially ambiguous.

On the one hand, Dretske clearly wants to emphasize that, even if one is not reacting in any way to X, one could still be seeing X. The behavioral response to X could even be the only way we, "externally", have to determine whether S sees X or not. However, we could think about cases in which S is seeing X while not reacting to it. Beyond a behavioristic ontology, such a lack of reaction does not have to be taken as evidence that she does not see X. In the case of the long-distance driver, the tree could be marginally, as it were, recognized, but still considered as unimportant for one's current task.

I suppose most people—basically, I would imagine, all people aside of some philosophers, and, perhaps, other scientists, committed to behavioristic fundamentalism—would agree with Dretske on this point. By itself, indeed, to allow that one can be seeing X even if one is not showing any reaction, does not necessarily imply that one does not realize that she is seeing X. In other words, this does not imply that one is recognizing something *as* something. Although such an object remains at the border of one's awareness, it is still within its realm.

I also suppose that most people would even accept the claim that we should keep recognition out of cases of simple seeing, and allow for cases of mere morphological apprehension of objects in the visual field.<sup>83</sup> Where most people, and not only behaviorists, would start to say that Dretske's account of simple seeing is unacceptable is when Dretske claims that simple seeing requires no noticing, no attention at all towards what is seen. The motivation for any uneasiness towards such a claim is that, as we saw above, morphological perception seems to imply some kind of attention on behalf of the subject, attention that can be even marginal or fringe. The subject, indeed, is required *automatically* to complete what the senses deliver to her. In other words, when S simply sees X, S simply sees a 3D object without classifying it and, thus, without

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<sup>83</sup> The very recognition of the tree as unimportant could even be, and probably normally is, performed automatically. As in the case of typological recognition, the operation is somehow on the threshold between subpersonal and personal performances. That said, in the present context, it is important whether or not the subject is or not aware of what appears as a tree. Dretske's statements quite clearly seem to speak for the negative alternative.

reacting to it. Mere amodal completion, however, seems to require that, even if only marginally, S gets involved with X. Since Dretske denies that simple seeing implies any kind of, more or less conscious, but certainly not voluntary, engagement with what is seen, one would have to say that simple seeing falls short of having objects as content. I think this is the point that, in one way or another, troubles the critics of Dretskean simple seeing, and that all of his critics find unacceptable.

In order to become able to better evaluate this quite slippery aspect of Dretske's simple seeing, and what its differentiated-but-unnoticed visual content properly consists in, it can be useful to consider one more objection put forward by Demircioglu. Arguing against the idea that non-attentiveness towards X does not exclude phenomenal consciousness of X, Demircioglu quotes A. D. Smith:

To postulate a conscious sensory state wherein the subject notices nothing, even minimally, seems to postulate a state wherein the subject is not *aware* or *conscious* of *anything*. And no such state, clearly, could constitute the seeing of anything. A *totally* non-attentive consciousness seems to make little phenomenological sense.<sup>84</sup>

Although Smith's considerations are quite reasonable, I think there are cases of absent-mindedness that could speak for the phenomenological reasonableness of Dretske's proposal as well. For instance, think of Joan sitting in the airport, in front of the boarding desk. Joan sees people getting in a row and starting to board. Joan even hears the speakers saying that she has been requested to board. Joan, however, does not properly realize what is happening—not even that it was *she* who had been called for the past 20 minutes. Finally, a steward shakes Joan, and tells her: "Are you Mrs. Coad?". Joan suddenly wakes up and automatically answers: "Yes". The steward, then, asks: "Why didn't you answer?". Joan suddenly realizes what she has been seeing all time long—without properly noticing it.

I think that this kind of situation is far from being a piece of science-fiction, and, indeed, even far from exceptional. If we, now, try to analyze it, we can easily realize that it clearly implies that Joan is not enacting any discriminative *response*, nor does she have any "inner recognition" of what she is seeing. It is not simply the case that Joan understands what she is seeing, but she has no interest for it. Rather, Joan is really devoid of any belief about what she is, in a way, aware of, and literally does not notice anything. How should we describe such a state? As an empty mind? That could mean she is not thinking about anything. This, however, aside from being quite contrary to the commonsensical equation between absent-mindedness and being-lost-in-thought, is not really relevant for us, since we are interested in her "sensuous-visual" state. Would we say that she is endowed with a kind of blank visual field? Would we really want to describe

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<sup>84</sup> Arthur D. Smith, *The Problem of Perception* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 303.



states of absent-mindedness as states of, as it were, visual blindness? I would certainly not want to. That could be the case for episodes of rapture, maybe, but not for quite "normal" absent-mindedness.

Joan's case helps us understand why behaviorist-functionalist accounts of seeing are not satisfactory. They, indeed, would not be able to account for cases of absent-mindedness.<sup>85</sup> Cases of absent-mindedness could, indeed, correspond to cases in which there is "no appreciation" for anything one is seeing, neither parts nor wholes. Cases of disinterest or indifference towards what one sees could imply that one recognizes something, but one keeps an indifferent attitude towards it. However, contrary to this, cases of absent-mindedness would be cases, in which the subject does even not realize *that* she is seeing. *How* is one seeing, though? What kind of *content* does simple seeing, in the end, have?

We could hypothesize that, under the title of simple seeing, Dretske tries to isolate a layer of our visual experience that corresponds to Kant (1781)'s *synthesis speciosa*. If this were the case, Dretske would have to acknowledge that, even for such a minimal form of visual experience, a synthesis is necessary, and that, therefore, some kind of at least sub-personal involvement with the delivery of the senses is implied. Even if synthetic operations should not be considered intellectual, even if we were to consider them as passive and merely sensible, and even if attention does not necessarily need to be exercised properly, perception would still require that the subject "endures" some kind of operation, undergoes some internal machinery that keeps her somehow semi-attentive, so to speak.<sup>86</sup>

Dretske should have no problem with this kind of synthetical passivity. For Dretske, operations carried out on a subpersonal level are not incompatible with simple seeing, which could rather be considered as their result. If *synthesis speciosa* is situated below the level of consciousness, then we could speculate, that the content of simple seeing is equivalent with the content of morphological perception, and this would then lead us to say that simple seeing is morphological perception.

Perhaps, we could add that it is a kind of non-full-fledged morphological perception. As we already mentioned in section 4.1.2, we could suppose that simple seeing has 3D contents, but parts of them are left undetermined. However, at times, Dretske seems to claim for the existence of a layer of simple

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<sup>85</sup> Dretske himself proposes some similar cases: see Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, 11–12. However, especially in his example of walking down the street in a preoccupied state of mind, which is similar to Armstrong's auto-pilot mode, appears to me different from Joan's case because, in the case of walking absent-mindedly, the subject is anyway physically busy, so she seems to entertain some kind of "cognitive," though perhaps "semi-blind", relation with the environment.

<sup>86</sup> For phenomenologically careful analyses of the passive and responsive side of attention, see Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004); "Wahrnehmung und Aufmerksamkeit beim frühen Husserl," *Philosophische Rundschau* 52, n. 4, 302–310.

seeing that does not engage the visual data in any way, and that the latter corresponds with mere qualitative differences within the visual field. Simple seeing only requires that some qualitative difference emerges in the visual field, while the subject does just about nothing to enable it, and does not even see them as parts of specific wholes. In a word, simple seeing seems to lie even before (at least some of our) "subpersonal engagement" with sensory delivery.

If this is the case, then we should exclude even *synthesis speciosa* from simple seeing's elements, somehow reserving it for acts of more attentive consciousness. The content of simple seeing would then comprehend the still unnoticed but seen emergent parts of the visual field that always have some definite qualitative character: a certain apparent color, a certain apparent size, a certain apparent shape. However, such qualitative differences are never apprehended, nor even properly seen, *per se*. They are just, so to say, moments of the visual field as a whole.

We could, then, object, that no proper visual experience can be considered as devoid of amodal completion. If amodal completion requires some kind of attention, if attention is considered as a form of cognitive activity on behalf of, or in, the subject, and if Dretske wants to keep any kind of cognitive activity out of simple seeing, including sub-personal activities, then simple seeing amounts to an incomplete experience of objects. More precisely, we should say that simple seeing corresponds to an experience of incomplete objects. If S is totally unattentive towards X, then X does not appear in its "amodal entirety". The question, then, is: can we really experience incomplete objects?

The question is, actually, ill-posed. Indeed, it is not a matter of incomplete objects, but rather of incomplete contents. We consider them as incomplete, though, because we compare them with contents that fully cover, as it were, the external three-dimensional objects, and, thus, we do not appreciate them for what they properly mean as 2<sup>1</sup>/2D contents.

To reach this appreciation, we could consider the contents of simple seeing by analogy to thing-perception. In the latter, we do not notice parts and aspects of the whole thing *per se*. This is the same in simple seeing. But, and this is a fundamental difference with plain perception, in the case of simple seeing, the whole is not a "thing" in space, but is rather the visual space itself, while the differentiated "objects" are its moments. Within the visual field, colors emerge as differently distributed, differently shaped, differently distributed. We have no *things*, but only qualitative differences. In a sense, one could understand the content of simple seeing as "rich arrays of qualitative discontinuities and coloured expanses".<sup>87</sup>

This kind of sensuous content corresponds to what Husserl has proposed as a part of the result of a specific form of phenomenological reduction.

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<sup>87</sup> Mulligan, "Perception," 191.

### 5.3 Seeing Without Interpreting

We have previously seen that Dretske's idea of conceptualization as digitalization seems to be in some agreement with Sellars's distinction between sensing and taking. We could say that conceptualization is a form of digitalization that allows us to extract information from the data that perception delivers to us, and, thus, to introduce it into the space of reasons. A similar idea seems to also be present in Evans (1982).

However, Dretske's theory essentially differs from Evans—at least as Evans is interpreted by Campbell—and from Sellars, in as much as Dretske maintains that nonconceptual content is conscious, that we can *see* it all the time, and that it is, thus, neither nonconscious nor a purely theoretical entity.<sup>88</sup>

The above confrontation with Husserl's layers of plain perception has led us to understand that the content of Dretske's simple seeing could, and probably should, be considered as something "less", or "poorer", than that of a fullfledged morphological perception. It rather seems to be either a  $2^1/2D$  content, or a mere array of qualitative discontinuities.<sup>89</sup>

In a way, the content of Dretske's simple seeing could really be identified with the much vituperated sense-data. We must now understand how such sense-data should properly be understood, and how not to be lead anew to the myth of the given.

To reach such an understanding, it could be appropriate, first, to keep qualitative discontinuities and  $2^1/2D$  expanses apart.  $2^1/2D$  expanses seem to, in at least some cases, presuppose a certain level of interpretation of the delivery of sensations. We could, for instance, think of a case in which, in the distance, I see a dark vertical stripe in the middle of a light yellow wall, and I do *simply* see it as nothing but as a stripe of color. Then, for some reason, I notice it, I focus on it, and, now, I apprehend it as a pole, or as an alley, or as a stripe of painting, or as a spot of mold, and so on. In the first two cases, I switch from two dimensional to three dimensional apprehension of the "original stripe". Likewise, we could think of many cases of trompe l'oeil. So, it could be speculated that, before noticing, *some* qualitative discontinuities even lie on this side of a  $2^1/2D$  articulation.

Still, I would avoid fully reducing the content of simple seeing to a 2Dworld. Such a reduction would amount to an extreme form of abstraction from our concrete "embodied" seeing. Our seeing happens, indeed, in a body that is

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<sup>88</sup> See Dretske, "Dretske's replies."

<sup>89</sup> It should be clear that the possible identification of the content of simple seeing as  $2^1/2D$  is *not* proposed by Dretske, and it is rather *my* suggestion. As I said from the beginning of this article, what I am proposing is a *development* of Dretske's ideas, and not a mere exposition or summary of them. Whether the development is appropriate or not, is matter of evaluation for the reader. However, I can at least assert that the way Dretske speaks of simple seeing *does not* exclude that it could be conceived as similar to Marr's  $2^1/2D$  vision.

3-dimensional, and we do not perceive the whole visual array as a flat colorful surface, but as something that also includes distances and depth. Therefore, I believe it can be more appropriate to conceive of the content of simple seeing in terms of both color discontinuities and colorful expanses in a 3D space.

The colored expanses that emerge thanks to the color differences in such a space are not properly 3-dimensional, but are rather, as we have mentioned above,  $2^{1/2}D$  expanses insofar as amodal completion is not at work. As a matter of fact, as cases like that of the dark stripe mentioned above show, when amodal completion is not at work, the possibility that some discontinuity is part either of a 2-dimensional or of a 3-dimensional whole remain open. Moreover, all hidden and non-properly given parts are not meant at all—even not as undetermined. If even this layer of perceptual experience, the one that we are considering as a consistent understanding of Dretske's simple seeing, were to be considered a form of positional consciousness, then we should say that the hidden parts *are not* posited.

One can seriously doubt that any conscious perceiver has ever entertained this kind of conscious content, and that, even assuming that it corresponds to a stage of our perceptual *process*, it is situated on a level that is still subpersonal and unconscious, while it becomes "lost" to our awareness in the very moment we properly become conscious of it. It cannot be properly seen, but only hypothetically reconstructed—as, in a way, Sellars (1997) seems to purport. Our conscious perceptual contents *cannot* be of this kind. The contents of simple seeing are rather theoretical entities—and, in the best case, real happenings in the space of causes.

As I have already stated in anticipation of this development, I believe this is not true. We can *concretely* see such pre-animated arrays of color-discontinuities, and we can also see that they lie, as it were, on this side of amodal completion as well as, to a certain extent, of a fully 3-dimensional determination. In order to sustain this possibly inconceivable idea and get a sharper view on the proper content of simple seeing, another element of Husserl's reflection on the epistemology of perception in the *Logical Investigations* can be extremely useful, namely what is known among scholars of Husserl as the *Reduktion auf den reellen Bestand.*, that is, a kind of concentration of the phenomenological reflection on a specific "immanent" part of perceptual experience.<sup>90</sup>

My goal here is not to give a full account of Husserl's troubled vicissitudes with the (many kinds of) phenomenological reduction. Therefore, I would here, very roughly, only point out that the "result" of the so-called reduction to the real stock is twofold: sensations, on the one hand, and apperceptions, also called interpretations, on the other. If we would like to clarify what sensations are, we

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<sup>90</sup> "Immanent" means, here, that we avoid positing anything that is not directly experienced. This should not lead us, though, to speak of an inner world that exists aside from an external one.

need first to clarify what interpretations/apperceptions really amount to. Husserl writes:

Apperception is our surplus, which is found in experience itself, in its descriptive content as opposed to the raw existence of sense: it is the act-character which as it were ensouls sense, and is in essence such as to make us perceive this or that object, see this tree, e.g., hear this ringing, smell this scent of flowers etc. Sensations, and the acts 'interpreting' them or apperceiving them, are alike experienced, but they do not appear as objects: they are not seen, heard or perceived by any sense.<sup>91</sup>

A proper understanding of interpretation in the *Logical Investigations* has been the topic of abundant discussions in the Husserlian scholarship. For our purposes, it suffices to point out that, by saying that in perception we have interpreted sensations, we bring forth an idea of the *content* of perception as an *articulated whole*.

In this regard, we should immediately do away with a possible misunderstanding, namely that Husserl advocates some sort of ontological or epistemological sensualism. The quotation above seems to be quite clear in asserting the opposite. Epistemologically, Husserl never proposed to start from sense-data as the indubitable bedrock of our edifice of knowledge. Ontologically, even the above-mentioned form of reduction is not able to prove that sense-data are the ultimate components of reality. Quite to the contrary, Husserl's non-sensualism about perception emerges quite clearly from his understanding of plain perception as being "animated" by an interpretation of sensations, and from the observation that the latter are never given in isolation from an interpretation. Perception, as we saw above, is a composite phenomenon, and sense-data are just a part of it—a part that, as the following considerations will show, cannot serve as the justification of any propositional belief *by itself*. To assume that sense-data exist *as an abstract part* of a wider whole, that includes also their "animation", implies that sense-data cannot constitute the basis, whether it be an ontological or an epistemological, of our (phenomenologically accessible) world, and that they can never *directly* be the content of a positional consciousness.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol. 2, 105.

<sup>92</sup> Following Asemissen, we have already noticed that Husserl's understanding of sensations, as traits, as something "immanent" could lead to some kind of Berkeleyanism. Many further studies and discussions have followed Asemissen's analyses. Here, I would just like to refer to: Vittorio De Palma, "Das Schema Inhalt/Auffassung in Husserls Denken: Ursprung, Konsequenzen, Überwindung," *Topos* 22, n. 2–3 (2009), 60–73; Robert Brisart, "L'expérience perceptive et son passif. À propos des sensations dans le constructivisme de Husserl," *Philosophie* 119, n. 4 (2013); Hopp, "Husserl on sensation, perception, and interpretation"; Michela Summa, Palma *Spatio-temporal intertwining. Husserl's transcendental aesthetic* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014).

Although the *Reduktion auf den reellen Bestand* seems to mean that we can develop an awareness of mere sense-data, one has to remark, first, that, as has been mentioned, it delivers us both sense-data *and* their interpretations. Second, the experience, if we may say so, corresponding to this kind of reduction, is none other than the result of a highly sophisticated practice. One could consider the result of the reduction to the real stock as being similar to, if not coincident with, the one of meditative performances, while others have suggested that it is a kind of experience that could also be attributed to creatures, which do not experience things, but merely the “rich arrays of qualitative discontinuities and coloured expanses”<sup>93</sup> we have mentioned above. The matter is that, if my proposal is correct, than this kind of content should not exclusively belong to meditative experiences or to some kind of non-human entities, but it rather is the content of our most immediate *conscious* relationship with the “outer world”, as well as what sustains our fundamental and unreflective belief in its existence.<sup>94</sup>

## 6 The conceptual givenness of the nonconceptual givens

The considerations on the different layers of visual experience we have carried out in the previous sections can help us understand that a kind of “formation” of visual contents on the basis of *given* visual data is at work already before the actualization of properly conceptual capacities.

As Husserl has shown in several of his writings, perception always stretches beyond the mere present sensations, and the respective *given* articulations, because thing-perception is a dynamical process and things are always given in a horizon of further manifestations (Husserl, 1973). More importantly, though, we should consider the point that even if our conceptual contents can somehow guide our perceptions, in the sense that they can either impinge on our typological recognitions or drive our attention toward parts of the visual scenery, they do not replace the perceptual content, nor properly enter into it.

Morphological seeing, in as much as it keeps working even when we conceptually refer to the same object, can enter into a more advanced cognitive process, namely, into a cognitive process that is prone to justification and

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<sup>93</sup> See Mulligan, “Perception,” 183.

<sup>94</sup> Williford has proposed an understanding, and a defense, of Husserl’s conception of *hyletic data* that is quite close to the one I am proposing here. See Kenneth Williford, “Husserl’s hyletic data and phenomenal consciousness,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 12, n. 3 (2013), 501–519. Although I generally agree with Williford’s exegesis, I believe we should more starkly free Husserl’s *hyletic data* from excessive immanentism in order to overcome the risks of Berkeleianism that, as already mentioned, were pointed out by Asemissen. In a nutshell, my proposal in this paper concerns the epistemic accessibility of the *external* resistance of the world. In this regard, Williford’s analyses are a kind of basis for mine, although they seem to me to have a different purpose.

verification. In this regard, without being a merely theoretical entity, plain perceptual content can be considered, I believe without too much pain,<sup>95</sup> as being immune to the mystification of its offerings to our epistemic life. Indeed, to make it short, the *rational* role of perceptual contents is that, which emerges in as much as it is found in agreement with one's beliefs. In this sense, *perceptual contents are not self-evident*, in as much as, aside from the epistemic game of giving and asking for reasons,<sup>96</sup> in which they only obliquely enter, they do not vindicate any evidential role.

In a nutshell, we could formulate the situation in the following way:

Plain perceptual contents cannot count as reasons, but can support reasons, and we can see when they do so, as well as when they do not.

Let us call this "Perceptual Evidence Thesis."<sup>97</sup>

As we said before, the Detachability Thesis, as well as other arguments in favor of nonconceptualism, would still allow that all that can enter our properly epistemic awareness of the world is only that, which is in accordance with our conceptual capacities, thus leaving aside any possible evidence of the independence of perceptual contents from our understanding.<sup>98</sup>

As a matter of fact, it seems to me that what was expressed in the last part of the Perceptual Evidence Thesis has, at least partially, been neglected in the discussion on conceptualism. Significantly, McDowell, who against Davidson's

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<sup>95</sup> The pains, as it were, have already admirably been endured and overcome by Hopp: see Walter Hopp, "Conceptualism and the myth of the given," *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, n. 3 (2009), 363–385.

<sup>96</sup> This kind of game should be extended, in my view, also to the, somehow more fundamental, if not more serious, process of being asked and looking for reasons.

<sup>97</sup> It goes without saying that such a thesis is derived from Husserl's understanding of *syntheses of coincidence and of contrast* as the cornerstone of knowledge in the *Logical Investigations*.

<sup>98</sup> This could be considered, in my view, one of the reasons why Sellars was not satisfied with C. I. Lewis' account of an experiential given: see Clarence Irving Lewis, *Mind and the World Order: Outline of a Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1929), especially Chapter II. It seems, indeed, that for Lewis the existence of such a kind of given is something evident, albeit non-conceptual. As far as I can see, for Sellars, one can speak of evidence only from within the space of reasons, thus of concepts, though.

Yet, as a reviewer who wishes to remain anonymous pointed out, C. I. Lewis' perspective on the subject is very similar to the one I tried to present here. It is obvious that comparing my findings to Lewis' perspective would go beyond the scope of this paper. I just want to make a small but potentially significant distinction between Lewis' position and the one I present here: while Lewis stresses the significance of the given to evaluate the veracity of our knowledge claims, as far as I can tell, he does not stress the requirement of conceptual reflection to properly "see" the non-conceptual given. I want to thank the reviewer for letting me draw attention to this (at least *prima facie*) distinction and giving me the chance to clear the way for additional research in this area.

coherentism tried to find a way *rationally* to account for the friction of the world against our beliefs, does not seem to properly appreciate all the cases in which we *see* that our thoughts are dismissed by perceptual contents. Moreover, this happens without any need for our perceptual contents to be fully conceptually structured—and especially not for the parts that reject the conceptual content.

At this point, one could wonder why I give so much importance to cases in which our perceptual contents turn down our conceptual beliefs rather than cases in which they match. The reason is that it is paradigmatically in cases of dismissal that we (can) become thematically aware of the presence of nonconceptual contents. When the two contents match, one could ignore the subsistence of nonconceptual content as such, and believe that, if not the world itself, at least our awareness of it is fully conceptual.

With that said, now it finally becomes clear that it's only thanks to our epistemic efforts that the "brute" given of perceptual experience emerges. If one were totally involved in non-epistemic seeing, then one would never become aware of the *resistance* of the (perceptual) given. The *awareness* of the nonepistemic givens *as* pure givens, that is, of something not-conceptualized, and, thus, not-understood, is, as it were, an effect of conceptual thought. This, however, does not show that the data of simple seeing are an effect of conceptual thought.

It goes without saying that, in the moment I become aware of something as "resisting" against my beliefs, or as something *to know*, but not yet known, I also acquire some belief about it, namely, about the "resisting stuff", as it were. The most fundamental belief I probably acquire is the existential belief<sup>99</sup> that something is there, *in view*. This, however, seems to me to be insufficient to say that such a given is conceptualized. It is rather a second order belief, derived from the rejection of the conceptual belief, and that only negatively connotes the object it was referred to. It is, in other words, a kind of reflective judgement.

The belief that I do *see* something is there, can only *obliquely* be considered a belief about the seen object, or, more basically, stuff. As a matter of fact, it only says that something is in my visual field, and does not normally, that is, outside philosophical discussions, purport to say anything about the features of the object as such. On the objectual side of such a "perceptual belief", we may only be able to say that we implicitly ascribe to the object its being different from the rest of the things present in visual field.

With this last remark, we finally bump into the most problematic, and for me most fundamental, aspect of the discourse concerning the perceptual given. Even if one were willing to accept the idea proposed above, according to which we can have perceptual contents that are nonconceptual and, at the same time, epistemically efficacious, one could, fairly enough, still be reluctant to accept that

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<sup>99</sup> In this case to be understood as an explicit propositional belief, of course, and not as a merely positional attitude.



this is the case for the contents of simple seeing that we have been discussing above, namely sense-data devoid of interpretation. To claim that we can even *epistemically see* a layer of perceptual contents that *rests* this side of any animation, that is to say, this side of any sense-bestowal, sounds quite miraculous.

It would be quite miraculous, indeed, if we were able to do it in the absence of conceptual capacities. What I am claiming, however, is that we can *see* sense-data as such thanks to our conceptual endeavors. Indeed, conceptual thought enables us to refer to the stuff we also refer to perceptually, but it does so by making its inner complexity explicit. This allows us to understand that the object is made of parts, and that we can isolate such parts from one another. This is valid also for cases of sensuous parts that different, and even opposite, or alternative, perceptual apprehensions have in common. To give an example, just think of the Jastrow duck-rabbit. Do we not *see* that there is something they have in common? Of course we do, and this has always been the puzzling *part* of such a visual experience.

The puzzle feeling, however, could somehow come to an end if we start to realize that we *see* the overlapping parts between the two apprehensions. Our perceptual automatism always drags us to see one of the competing figures, and it is almost impossible to see the "stimulus" by itself. This does not mean that we do not see it, though.

Thanks to the Husserlian reflections on plain perception above, we can now say that, in every plain perception, a plurality of elements are seen, although not separately from one another, and, thus, never *per se*. This implies that all layers of perceptual experience "below" conceptual seeing are not able to realize that there is something devoid of interpretation and, as it were, working as the basis for any interpretation. With that said, the notion that only through categorial thinking, otherwise known as propositional intentionality or conceptual contents, can we come to intend even the abstract parts *per se*, does not mean that we were not seeing them before such a form of intentionality is at work. Therefore, we can say that, in the Jastrow duck-rabbit case, only propositional thought allows us to *objectify* the parts that the two figures have in common, yet the parts were already there, and we had been seeing them the whole time, even though we had not noticed them.

We now need to realize that the duck-rabbit, and all ambiguous figures, are just paradigmatic cases that help us realize what happens in *all* cases of visual perception: something lies there that allows our apprehensions, a "this" that allows the vision of a "such-and-so". We normally do not notice it—and, indeed, it is impossible to notice it, as long as we are not able to use conceptual capacities to compositionally refer to the objects of our perceptual experiences. This, however, does not mean that our conceptual maneuvers *create* or *produce* the "stimulus", as it were. To the contrary, the latter seems to emerge as that, which our conceptual capacities *cannot grasp*, if not negatively, as the *phenomenological complement* of what they actually seize.

I think that, thanks to the story above about the layers of our visual experiences, and after we have understood that conceptual thought is what allows us to isolate abstract parts of what we intend, we can now say that we can not only *infer* that something like sense-data lie at the basis of our encounter with the (sensuous) world, but we can also assert that we *see* that we can verify what sense-*data* correspond to, namely *parts* of our visual experiences that we normally would call properties of objects, but that could also be independent of the wholes of which we, from time to time, interpret them to be a part of. This is what I refer to as the *resistance of the given*.

## 7 Realizing one sees more than one understands

Going back to my initial story about Lucy, the teapot, and myself, are we now able to decide whether the hypothesis that my first visual encounter with the teapot had only the respective sense-data as its content, is right? Honestly, I do not think so. As a matter of fact, this question can probably be decided only by means of empirical investigations.

This notwithstanding, the reflections and analyses carried out in the previous pages allow us to say that it is theoretically possible that a form of *conscious* simple seeing occurs, and that the contents of this simple seeing are mere sensedata. In this way, I believe that the reflections of the previous pages show that

$$\diamond(\neg C \wedge P)$$

and showing this was one of the first purposes of this paper.

Moreover, we have established that we can *epistemically see* the content of “raw” sensations. These are no more mere theoretical constructs. Something emerges as *visually* and *objectively*, though *not objectively*, there, in the same way the array of lines and empty spaces, that allows me to see both a rabbit and, alternatively, a duck, *is there*. It is not a merely theoretical entity, nor is it something which I can only inferentially posit the existence of, but it is rather an abstract part of the contents of my concrete and direct experience. *Sense-data exist, and we can witness them*, though only in cooperation with conceptual contents. The fact that we are perceptually not able to *apprehend* such an array of contents of sensation outside of their conjunction with a rabbit-figure or with a duck-figure, does not make it necessary for it to exist only as a part of this or as a part of that, though. We should, therefore, recognize the possibility of a non-objectual, as it were, conscious experience of them. This is what Dretske’s simple seeing, at least in my interpretation, is meant to take hold of, as well as what I assume to happen in my story when I *see* the teapot the first time.

To support the version of the story this paper started with, I would finally invite the reader to think about cases where one is trying to remember whether *what* one saw was of a certain kind or not. I think there are cases in which, in such a situation, one arrives to the conclusion “no, what I saw was not X”,

although one still has no proper knowledge or proper belief about what one saw. In some cases, this can be done even without any definite belief about the *form* of what one saw. This would be a kind of negative evidence for the existence of non-epistemic, or simple, seeing and of its pre-conceptual and pre-morphological "data." The fact that we cannot grasp it by means of any concept, type, or form, does not imply it is not "there" or that we do not consciously confront it. I would argue that this is something that does not only happen in cases of recollection, but rather also in cases of actual perception, paradigmatically when one attempts to *realize* what one is seeing, and how what one is seeing is. We can always realize that something is there, we are trying to make sense of—also beyond the sense, embedded in which we, somehow automatically, or passively, see it.

If all this is correct, then we could reasonably hypothesize that there is a kind of conscious seeing that lies before noticing, and, thus, before morphological completion, as well as typological and conceptual completion. Such a kind of basic seeing would have sense-data as its content, which are still devoid of any "interpretation". As such, it leaves more than one "mode of presentation" open. This does not mean that it allows *any* mode of presentation, or *any* interpretation, though. Sense-data are given as different from each other, and arranged in a certain way throughout the visual field. Such differences and positions *are not* a matter of interpretation, although they can properly be grasped only through some interpretation—and, crucially, through some *conceptual*, or *propositional*, interpretation.

At this point, one could, perhaps, say that the proper realization of the given is inferential: I can see it only on the basis of reasoning, or reflection, on perceptual reports. This is only partially correct, though. Indeed, we can not properly say that the given is inferred, otherwise it would be something conceptual. The peculiarity of the given I tried to bring out during the previous pages is that it emerges as the exact counterpart to our conceptual capacities. We realize it on the basis of reflection, but it is not a product of reflection, and it also strikes us as something which does not derive from any inference, but rather as resisting any inference. It is because it is the counterpart to conceptual capacities and competences that it can emerge and be properly seen only after that our conceptual capacities are put to work. Only in the aftermath of the actualization of conceptual capacities can the "purely given" constitute the proper object of a specific gaze—a gaze that is definitely different from any layer of plain perception. In a sense, the *fundamental given* is what we see by means of our conceptual capacities, but is also that which resists against them. As such, it is a non-propositional content, but, like all abstract parts, can be properly grasped only thanks to the implementation of propositional understanding. As a matter of fact, we *cannot* thematically see sense-data separately from the wholes they allow to see. We cannot observe sense-data independently of the wholes they allow us to see and observe. This does not mean that they do not exist separately from, or that they can exist only in, such wholes.

## 8 Conclusions

To assert that nothing in nonconceptual dress can enter the palace of reason, implies neither that anything exists outside that palace, nor that we cannot see that there exists a conceptually naked folk. To the contrary, we can rationally have firm and clear evidence that our beliefs are about something that lies beyond the palatial game of giving and asking for reasons, and that, indeed, makes such a game meaningful, on the one hand, and even feeds it, on the other. That said, only an inhabitant of the palace can properly realize the presence of what dwells outside of it—in a sense, of what the very palace is sustained by.

The given I tried to highlight in the above paragraphs is efficacious only thanks to conceptual takings. So, in this sense, it does not violate the Sellarsian commandment “Do not show yourself in the palace of reason without inferential references and conceptual garnishment!”. In a sense, it is accompanied by inferential procedures, although not as a result of inferential procedures. The peculiarity of the “simple given”, as we could call it, is that it withstands the chance of apprehension, thus showing, as it were, the independence of the sensuous world, and, somehow, its ability to go beyond our capacities of perceptual verification of *what* the world, from time to time, is. In other words, perceptual reports concerning simple seeing can only say that there is something given that cannot be reduced to its mode of givenness. In this sense, the given I am laying claim for violates another possible version of the Sellarsian commandment, namely: “Do not show yourself in the palace of reason as if you were independent of it!”. As a matter of fact, the epistemic efficacy of the given I am vindicating is strictly dependent on the infringement of this second commandment.

Keeping in mind the connection between givenness and content that lies at the basis of the current debate on conceptualism—the content is the “way of being given” (*Art des Gegebenseins*) –, we could say that what is given is always given in some way, but the way is not what is given. The given is what the way can cognitively not exhaust. Still, we learn to identify and appreciate what is purely given, and its difference from the way it is from time to time given, by means of conceptual reflections. In particular, we can learn to appreciate the given as that, which, though not a reason for our *positive* empirical beliefs, supports or opposes them. Moreover, its flickering through different apprehensions, founds our reason for believing in the existence of the world as something independent of our thought, but with which we are in touch.

I would, in the end, agree with Travis,<sup>100</sup> and say that our senses are silent, but I would add that, to appreciate such a silence, we need to overcome the

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<sup>100</sup> Charles Travis, “The silence of the senses,” *Mind* 113, n. 449 (2004), 57–94.

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stubbornness of our intellect—and to overcome it, as it were, from within the intellect itself.<sup>101</sup>

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