Commentary on Pete Mandik's "Color-Consciousness Conceptualism"

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Introduction

Hi, my name is Jake Berger. And, my name is David Pereplyotchik. We are graduate students at the CUNY Graduate Center, and instructors at Baruch College, CUNY. What follows is a video presentation of our comments on Pete Mandik's paper "Color-Consciousness Conceptualism."

Summary of Pete's Argument

Pete's goal in this paper is to defend color-consciousness conceptualism (henceforth 'conceptualism') from what he calls the Diachronic Indistinguishability Argument ('DIA'). Pete does not explicitly characterize conceptualism in his paper, but we take it to be the conjunction of the following two claims:

(1) For every color one can consciously experience, one can conceptually characterize that color.

(2) Every time one consciously experiences a color, one deploys a concept of that color.

The DIA relies on the following data. Upon being presented *diachronically* with samples of different basic hues—say, a red paint chip followed by a blue paint chip, with no significant intervening delay—subjects are excellent at judging the two samples to be of different colors. And, when presented *synchronically* with samples of two *similar*, yet *distinct*, shades of the same hue, subjects are good at judging that the two chips are

different in color. However, when presented *diachronically* with samples of two similar, yet distinct, shades of the same hue, subjects generally *cannot* tell the shades apart.

Some take such data as presenting a problem for conceptualism. Assuming that concept possession involves an ability to redeploy a concept consistently in various conditions, if subjects possess and deploy two distinct color concepts during the synchronic presentation of similar shades of the same hue, they should be able to deploy those same concepts in the *diachronic* presentation of those shades, thereby successfully discriminating the shades. But, subjects *fail* to make the relevant discrimination, which suggests that conscious, nonconceptual, experiential content outstrips our conceptual repertoire.

Pete challenges a core assumption in the DIA—viz., "that the colors are present in consciousness in the same way regardless of mode (simultaneous vs. serial) of presentation" (4). He notes that context effects may well be playing a role in these circumstances. Pete's suggestion is that in the synchronic presentation, the context allows for the deployment of comparative color concepts, such as DARKER THAN and BLUER THAN, which enable successful discrimination. However, in diachronic presentations, the colors are not simultaneously available for comparison. In *that* context, one is *in*capable of deploying the relevant comparative concepts. (We're ignoring whatever comparisons subjects might be making between the stimulus materials and background scenery.) Instead, subjects only deploy *non*comparative concepts, such as RED or BLUE, which explains why they cannot make such fine discriminations. Pete concludes that the conceptualist has the resources to explain the discrimination data.

For the most part, we agree with what Pete says. We too favor something that might be called conceptualism, and we think Pete's way of responding to the DIA is spot on. So, while we offer a few tentative objections, they are in the spirit of eliciting clarification from Pete.

A Nonconceptual Aspect of Conscious States?

We have several questions about the useful Boxology that Pete includes at the end of the paper. In particular, we're not clear about whether the arrows in figures 5-7 signify anything beyond temporal succession (e.g., causation or inheritance of properties).

Pete claims that there are nonconscious, nonconceptual states, which he labels in his flowcharts 'nonconscious sensory impressions'. These have what we will call *sensory* properties, which Pete notationally distinguishes from sensible color properties with a '*'. That is, a blue stimulus gives rise to a sensory impression bearing the blue* sensory property.

Pete seems to conceive of the nonconscious sensory impression bearing blue1* in figure 6, coupled with concepts (from "the nonconscious store"), as *causing* the conscious experience. But, while it's clear that the conscious experience inherits the *concepts* from the nonconscious store, we're not sure whether the conscious experience also inherits the sensory properties. E.g., does the conscious experience of blue have blue1*, in addition to the concept BLUE?

We think it's reasonable to identify the sensory properties (e.g., blue1*) with what is traditionally called the *qualitative character* of conscious experience. If Pete denies

that blue1* makes it into the conscious experience, then he is either denying that conscious experience has qualitative character—a position we find rather implausible—or rejecting the identification of these sensory properties with qualitative character. If the latter, then we are owed of an account of what qualitative character is, and how it differs from the already-posited sensory properties.

More broadly, we want to know whether Pete would deny that conscious states have a nonconceptual *component* in addition to a conceptual component (and, if so, why?). Countenancing a nonconceptual aspect to conscious states (e.g., the sensory properties) does not amount to countenancing nonconceptual *content*.

If content is always *conceptual* (and we put aside misleading terms like 'phenomenal content'), it may well be that a conscious experience has both (conceptual) content and nonconceptual qualitative *character*. There's a difference between the claim that all conscious *content* is conceptual, which we think is true, and the claim that all there is to a conscious state is its conceptual content, which we think is false.

Conscious Nonconceptual States?

In the previous section, we asked whether Pete denies that there can be a nonconceptual aspect to conscious states. Our question in this section is whether Pete thinks every conscious state *must* have a conceptual component.

We noted that conceptualism seems to be the conjunction of two claims. We do endorse claim (1)—i.e., that we can characterize conceptually all the colors that we can experience—which is why we're happy to be called conceptualists. But, we think

there's an ambiguity in claim (2)—the claim that we always deploy such concepts in conscious experience. In particular, the claim equivocates on the term 'experience'.

Following Pete, let us characterize sensory impressions as those states that have sensory properties such as blue1* but no conceptual content, and perceptions as those states that have conceptual content. Thus, claim (2) bifurcates into:

(2a) In the conscious *perception* of a color, one deploys a concept of that color.

(2b) In the conscious *sensory impression* of a color, one deploys a concept of that color.

(2a) is obviously true. And, we all agree that (2b) is false, but for different reasons. We think that (2b) is false because sensory impressions do not have conceptual content. On the higher-order thought theory of consciousness—which we endorse but Pete rejects—the higher-order thoughts in virtue of which sensory impressions become conscious *do* include concepts. However, the sensory impressions themselves have no conceptual content, and the concepts involved in the higher-order thoughts are color* concepts—i.e., concepts of *sensory* properties, not of sensible color properties.

Pete, however, thinks that (2b) is false because he insists that his posited sensory impressions are necessarily nonconscious or subpersonal. It is not clear to us *why* he thinks sensory impressions are never conscious.

The issue is whether there are conscious states with no conceptual content. It seems to us that a conceptualist could consistently maintain that people can conceptually characterize every color that they can consciously experience, and yet *deny* that people always *deploy* the color concepts in conscious experiences of those

colors, *if by 'experiences' one means sensory impressions*. Indeed, this is the sort of conceptualism that some higher-order thought (HOT) theorists prefer, and Pete himself admits that he "like[s] the consciousness conceptualism portion of HOT" theory (2). We don't have a knock-down argument for the existence of conscious sensory impressions. But, we don't see in Pete's paper an argument to the effect that there aren't any.

Our Conceptual Repertoire

Shifting gears, we want to ask some questions about Pete's views concerning a typical subject's conceptual repertoire. To begin, we would like to know why Pete concedes to Evans and McDowell that people lack noncomparative concepts for every color that they can experience. It's true that we don't have words for every color, but it's compatible with this that a fine-grained sensory impression (e.g., a bearer of blue1*) triggers a correspondingly fine-grained noncomparative concept (e.g., BLUE1).

Deep issues concerning the conditions on concept possession arise here. If one supposes, as it seems Pete does, that consistent re-identification of Xs is a condition on the possession of the concept of X, then one might take the discrimination data presented above as evidence that we do not possess such fine-grained noncomparative concepts. But, it seems that we often *do* credit people with concepts despite their inability to consistently re-identify the referents of those concepts. The literature here is vast (OAK TREE and ARTHRITIS come to mind), so we don't want to make too much of this. But, it's worth noting that it's not *obvious* that failure to re-identify colors in diachronic presentations precludes possession of noncomparative color concepts.

Let us now put this issue aside and grant that people do *not* have noncomparative concepts for every color; that is, let's assume that the conceptualist's reply to the DIA really *does* require an appeal to comparative concepts. Still, one might wonder why that appeal would work. That is, what is it about the context of the synchronic presentation that elicits the comparative concept? Why doesn't it happen that, when one is simultaneously presented with samples of blue1 and blue2, one just deploys the noncomparative concept BLUE for both? What explains the fact that one *also* deploys the comparative concept DARKER THAN? Surely, it's not that we always deploy whatever concepts that we can. So, what is it about the synchronic context that triggers the deployment of the comparative concept? One can imagine an evolutionary story here, but we want to know what Pete would say.

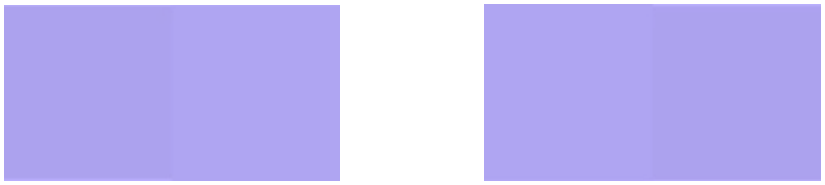
Flipping the issue, why suppose that, during the *diachronic* presentations, subjects are capable of deploying only *non*comparative concepts (again, ignoring comparisons to background scenery)? We grant that a subject's short-term memory buffer may be empty when perceiving the first of the serially presented colors. But is the subject's *long*-term memory empty too? Why couldn't a subject retrieve a color sample from memory to entertain as mental imagery, and use such a sample to deploy a comparative concept? For example, a subject presented with blue1 might form a sensory impression that has blue1* and deploy the concept BLUE, but *then* retrieve from long-term memory a sensory impression that has blue3*—a sensory property corresponding to a classic blue—and deploy the concepts BLUE, BLUER THAN, and CLASSIC BLUE.

Now, even if some subjects are doing this, they still of course fail the diachronic discrimination tasks. Thus, appealing to comparative concepts would not help in explaining the discrepancy between the synchronic and diachronic cases, and Pete's defense of conceptualism would fail. Nor could Pete simply deny that we are able to deploy these sorts of comparative concepts in comparing mental imagery retrieved from long-term memory to presently perceived color samples. We often make judgments that the blue we're currently experiencing is darker than, say, sky blue despite the absence of a sky blue stimulus.

Nonetheless, we think Pete might have some lines of response to this. He could amend his defense by saying that it's only the deployment of comparative concepts in comparing *currently perceived* colors that explains the relevant differences in discrimination. But this response must be supplemented with an account of the mechanism that achieves the relevant effect.

Pete's Experimental Design

The objection we presented above resembles Pete's alternative experimental design, wherein subjects are presented diachronically with two *sets* of distinct, but similar, shades of the same hue. In our example, one color of each presentation is only mentally represented. In Pete's design both colors appear in each presentation, but one set is left-right reversed relative to the other set.



Set 1 **Set 2**

Subjects are asked to judge whether the shade on the right side of the set displayed in the first presentation is the same as or different from the right side of the set displayed in the second presentation.

Setting aside the possibility that left-right reversal amounts to a change of context (as it does in the case of faces), we really like Pete's design, and we should say that we are entirely on board with the account that Pete would give if it turned out that subjects could make the relevant discriminations. Given that they are deploying the relevant comparative concepts during both of the diachronic presentations, we agree that Pete's construal of conceptualism predicts their success at discriminating.

However, we have trouble understanding what Pete's account would be if subjects *failed* to make the relevant discriminations. That is, we're not sure what he means when he writes that "such failures would be predicted by the present form of conceptualism, since the colors straddling the presentation delay are not in a position to trigger appropriate applications of comparative color concepts," (13).

As far as we can tell, there's no reason why subjects would be unable to deploy *any* noncomparative concepts. Given the nature of the stimulus materials, subjects would clearly use at least one comparative concept during each of the two presentations. So, Pete must mean that subjects are deploying the wrong *kind* of comparative concepts during the first or second presentation. But, then the question arises: Are subjects deploying the wrong comparative concept to compare the two colors *within* each single presentation? Or are they deploying the wrong concept in comparing the colors *between* the presentations? The former option appears closed off to Pete, since it doesn't conform to the discrimination data that motivated the DIA to

begin with. If, however, Pete takes the other option, then he countenances subjects' being able to deploy comparative concepts that contrast colors across presentations. And, if Pete believes this, why doesn't he think subjects are able to do so when they are presented with a single color diachronically as in the original discrimination data?

In the end, we're not sure that the conceptualist would have a good explanation of subjects' failure to discriminate the materials in Pete's new experimental design, and it seems such failure would falsify conceptualism. In a roundabout way, though, this is a *good* result for Pete and for conceptualists more generally. A hypothesis that isn't falsifiable is no hypothesis at all.[1]

[1] We thank David Rosenthal for providing many very helpful comments on earlier drafts.