Comments on Pete Mandik's 'Color-Consciousness Conceptualism'

Pete's aim is to defend a conceptualist view of conscious perceptual experience against an objection which he calls the *diachronic indistinguishability argument* (DIA).

I'm pretty sympathetic to Pete's conclusion: I agree that the DIA isn't a decisive objection to conceptualism. At the same time, though, I think that there are a few issues over which either we do disagree or we might disagree, so I'm going to focus on those issues in particular in these comments.

The areas of actual or potential disagreement concern:

i) The brand of conceptualism that Pete defends, and its relation to other versions of the view.
ii) The fundamental reason why the DIA fails as an objection to conceptualism.
iii) Whether a synchronic version of the indistinguishability argument might pose more of a threat to conceptualism than the diachronic version that Pete discusses.

1. Conceptualism

As Pete characterizes the view, the conceptualist's claim concerns the fineness of grain of our experiences. As regards colour experience, for example, the claim is that our conscious experiences of colour are no more fine-grained than the set of colour concepts that we can deploy in our experiences.

As I understand it, the distinctive feature of Pete's conceptualism is that it makes no appeal to perceptual demonstrative concepts in order to account for experiential fineness of grain. I take this to be the main difference between Pete's version of the view and those developed, for example, by John McDowell in *Mind and World* and by Bill Brewer in *Perception and Reason*.

McDowell and Brewer accept that we don't have general concepts (e.g. RED or SCARLET) which match the fineness of grain of our experiences. But they argue that as well as such general concepts, we also have perceptual demonstrative concepts (e.g. THIS COLOUR) which can account for experiential fineness of grain.[1]

But Pete doesn't think that conceptualism needs to appeal to demonstrative concepts in order to account for fineness of grain. Pete's strategy is to appeal instead to comparative concepts (e.g. DARKER THAN). So in the case where I experience the fine-grained colours of two blue objects, one slightly darker than the other, the idea would be that we can account for the fineness of grain of my

[1] See *Mind and World*, pp. 56-7, and *Perception and Reason*, pp. 170-4.

experience by reference to my deployment of my comparative concept DARKER THAN as well as my non-comparative concept BLUE.

I'm not convinced, though, that the conceptualist can account for fineness of grain by appealing to comparative concepts in this way.

To see an initial problem here, notice that if one's experience represents a pair of objects, A and B, both as being blue and A as being darker than B, the experience thereby remains neutral on various aspects of the situation. One such aspect is the degree to which A is darker than B: the experience leaves it open whether A is only very slightly darker than B or whether it's much darker than B. Typically, though, our experiences do not remain neutral on such issues. Our experiences take a stand on the degree to which one perceived object is darker than another. So typically, I think that one's experience must do more than represent A and B both as being blue and A as being darker than B.

You might wonder whether the conceptualist could solve this problem by appealing to demonstrative comparative concepts (e.g. THIS MUCH DARKER THAN). Suppose that my experience represents A and B both as being blue and A as being this much darker than B. If so, then my experience is not neutral on the degree to which A is darker than B. I'm not sure, though, that this proposal gets to the heart of the problem. The reason is that my experience still remains neutral on a more fundamental aspect of the situation, namely *which* particular shades of blue that stand in this darker than relation are instantiated by A and B. Suppose that just as $blue_1$ is this much darker than $blue_{15}$, so $blue_{11}$ is this much darker than $blue_{25}$. If so, then my experience leaves open the possibility that A has $blue_1$ and B has $blue_{15}$. But it also leaves open the possibility that A has $blue_{11}$ and B has $blue_{25}$. And again, the point is that our experiences do not normally remain neutral in this way. Our experiences take a stand as to which particular shades perceived objects have.

In his paper, Pete makes the point that the conceptualist can appeal to concepts of determinateness: there is nothing to stop the conceptualist from claiming that we deploy such concepts in our experiences. I agree with that point, but I don't see that it will help with the present problem. The problem is not that our experiences take a stand as to the determinateness of the shades instantiated by perceived objects; it's rather that our experiences take a stand as to *which* particular shades with the relevant degrees of determinateness are instantiated by perceived objects.

The upshot of this, in my view, is that the conceptualist will indeed need to appeal to demonstrative concepts such as THIS COLOUR in more or less the way that McDowell and Brewer do in order to account for experiential fineness of grain.

2. The DIA

The second issue that I'm going to focus on concerns the DIA and its failure as an objection to conceptualism. I agree with Pete that the DIA does fail. But I think we may disagree as to the fundamental reason for this.

As Pete characterizes the DIA, it's based on the observation that we can find pairs of objects which are discriminable in colour to a subject when presented at the same time, but not when presented one after the other. The thought is then that if we make certain assumptions about the relation between colour concept possession and memory, we can find a route from this observation to the conclusion that conceptualism must be false.

Pete rejects the argument on the basis that it depends on a mistaken assumption. The assumption is that if there's a difference between the ways in which objects are experienced when presented at the same time, then there must also be a difference between the ways in which those objects are experienced when presented one after the other. Pete rejects this assumption on the grounds that in many cases, changes in the context in which objects are presented result in changes in the way that those objects are experienced.

This means that it's open to the conceptualist to give the following account of the supposedly problematic case. If objects are discriminable in colour to one when presented simultaneously, then there is a difference between the apparent colours of those objects. If those same objects are indiscriminable in colour to one when presented serially, then there is no difference between the apparent colours of those objects. There is no actual change in the objects' colours between the simultaneous and serial presentations; but there is a change in the way those colours are experienced. If such an account is acceptable, Pete argues, then the DIA fails.

I agree that Pete puts his finger on an important problem with the version of the DIA that he considers in his paper. I'm not sure, though, that this is the fundamental problem with the DIA. I think that the fundamental problem may lie in the assumption that the DIA needs to make about the relation between colour concept possession and memory.

Let's first try to get clear on what the assumption needs to be. Suppose we accept that in certain cases where objects are indiscriminable in colour to one when presented serially, there *is* a slight difference between the apparent colours of those objects. (I agree with Pete that the conceptualist can challenge this idea, but for the purposes of argument let's accept it.) If so, then there is a certain kind of diachronic discriminative ability that one lacks in such cases: although there is a difference between the colour that one object appears to have at an earlier time and the colour that another object appears

to have at a later time, one can't tell at the later time that there is such a difference. So if in addition we accept that in order to conceptualize the apparent colour of a perceived object, one must possess a corresponding diachronic discriminative ability of something like this kind, an argument against conceptualism begins to threaten.

Why should we accept, though, that in order to conceptualize the apparent colour of a perceived object, one must possess a corresponding diachronic discriminative ability of the sort described? Why think that in order to possess a colour concept at one time, one must be able to make discriminations involving colours presented at other times?

The thought might be that if one doesn't possess such a diachronic discriminative ability corresponding to a particular colour, then there is no evidence to suggest that one possesses a *bona fide* concept of that colour. One would be in the same position as Wittgenstein's subject who puts his hand on top of his head to prove that he knows how tall he is.[2]

I don't see that this follows, though. For even if one lacks a diachronic discriminative ability corresponding to the apparent colour of a perceived object, perhaps one might still possess a perfectly good synchronic discriminative ability corresponding to that colour. For example, suppose that when one is presented with one of the objects in the supposedly problematic case, one can tell the difference between the apparent colour of that object and the apparent colours of any other simultaneously presented objects. It seems to me that if one possesses such a synchronic discriminative ability corresponding to the apparent colour of a perceived object, then that would constitute good evidence that one possesses a concept of that colour.

So although I agree with Pete both that the DIA fails and that he has identified one important problem with it, I think that there is also this further problem, one which seems to me more fundamental.

3. Synchronic Indistinguishability Arguments

The last issue that I'm going to focus on concerns the question of whether a synchronic version of the indistinguishability argument might pose more of a threat to conceptualism than the diachronic version.

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[2] *Philosophical Investigations*, § 279. Cf. McDowell's *Mind and World*, p.57, and Brewer's *Perception and Reason*, p. 171.

As I see it, a synchronic version of the argument would start from the idea that colour indiscriminability is non-transitive in this sense: we can find objects A, B, and C, such that when they are presented simultaneously to one, A is indiscriminable in colour from B, B is indiscriminable in colour from C, but A is discriminable in colour from C. If colour indiscriminability is non-transitive in this sense, the thought would be, then we must allow for indiscriminable differences between the apparent colours of simultaneously presented objects: the apparent colours of A and B are indiscriminable but distinct, as are the apparent colours of B and C. If in addition we make certain assumptions about the relation between colour concept possession and the ability to make synchronic colour discriminations, then an anti-conceptualist argument threatens.[3]

I suspect that a synchronic indistinguishability argument of this form will be more difficult for the conceptualist to handle than the diachronic version of the argument that Pete considers. The reason is that the synchronic version of the argument seems to me to avoid both my objection to the DIA and Pete's objection.

The synchronic argument seems to avoid my objection to the DIA precisely because it's synchronic. My objection was based on the idea that one can possess a colour concept without possessing a corresponding diachronic discriminative ability. But even I'm right about that, it's irrelevant to the synchronic version of the argument. The argument requires only the weaker assumption that there is a link between concept possession and the ability to make synchronic discriminations.

The synchronic argument also seems to avoid Pete's objection to the DIA. Pete argues that in the supposedly problematic diachronic case, if objects are indiscriminable in colour to one when presented serially, then there is no difference between the apparent colours of those objects. In the synchronic case, the analogous claim would be that if objects are indiscriminable in colour to one when presented simultaneously, then there is no difference between the apparent colours of those objects. It doesn't look open to Pete to make that claim. In the synchronic case, A is indiscriminable in colour from B, B is indiscriminable in colour from C, but A is discriminable in colour from C. Suppose we say that since A is indiscriminable in colour from B, there is no difference between the apparent colours of A and B. And suppose we say the same about B and C. If so, then we're committed to saying that there is no difference between the apparent colours of A and C. And the point is that this cannot be so, given that A and C are discriminable in colour.

[3] I develop my own anti-conceptualist argument of this form in my 'Conceptualism and the (Supposed) Non-Transitivity of Colour Indiscriminability', *Philosophical Studies* 2007.

So it looks to me as though Pete's objection to the DIA wouldn't work when directed against the synchronic version of the argument, since his objection depends on a claim the analogue of which seems to be false in the synchronic case.