University of Groningen

Walter Hopp, Perception and knowledge: a phenomenological account
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Published in:
Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences

DOI:
[10.1007/s11097-014-9382-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-014-9382-y)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van Mazijk, C. (2015). Walter Hopp, Perception and knowledge: a phenomenological account. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 14(4), 1185-1191. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-014-9382-y>

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**Walter Hopp, *Perception and Knowledge:
a Phenomenological Account***

Cambridge University Press. 2011. ISBN: 978-1-107-00316-3

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*Perception and Knowledge*¹ is a book that sets out to enrich the vast field of contemporary debates about the justificatory relation between perception and thought with some of the goods phenomenology has to offer. Many major figures of Modern philosophy, such as Locke, Kant and Husserl regarded the nature of this relation as one of the greatest mysteries in philosophy. Its complexity results from the way it touches upon some of the most obscure and all-encompassing philosophical issues, such as the nature and limits of human knowledge, the inner workings of experience, and humanity's place in reality. Especially since the works of mid twentieth century philosophers such as Quine and Sellars, who challenged the assumptions of logical positivism and empirical foundationalism, perception is usually denied the special role of offering direct insight into external reality. By contrast, it is today quite commonplace to think of beliefs as being justified by other beliefs only, as Davidson famously put it. These considerations have in turn led some of the most influential epistemologists today to think of the contents of perception as entirely conceptual. Spurred by McDowell's *Mind and World* (1994), they want to abide by the Sellarsian principle that nothing in our sensory experience can function like a hinge between beliefs and a lawful, external reality. Instead, what we perceive is always already a part of the 'space of reasons' (McDowell 1994, p. 7), both informed by and open to our network of rational capacities. Whether I look at the cup of coffee on my desk or simply use it pre-reflectively by drinking from it, the perception and act respectively can be 'exploited in active thinking' (ibid., p. 47), and to that extent their contents are said to be conceptual. The conceptualist thesis further stresses that it is our upbringing in cultural practices

¹Unless otherwise noted, all references are to this book

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and language games that brings about our ‘second nature’, by means of which we are enabled to exploit conceptual abilities ‘passively’, that is, effortless and instantaneously, as for instance in perception. Second nature thus sustains the central doctrine of conceptualism that the understanding has a lasting and pervading impact on the contents of experience.

However, this conceptualist thesis has witnessed a lot of resistance, also among phenomenologists.² Hopp's *Perception and Knowledge* belongs to this phenomenological counter-movement. Non-conceptualists may defend a number of different things, but all of them believe that there are mental contents that are not informed by concepts and/or are not open to being conceptualized by the subject. The primary aim of Hopp's book is, as I take it, to develop a theory of non-conceptual content that is based on Husserl's early approach to intentionality in *Logical Investigations*. There are two main alternatives to this view the rejection of which takes up most of the book: conceptualism (chapter two, three and four) and relationalism (chapter five and six). Against these theories, Hopp develops two notions of non-conceptual content: ‘horizontal’ (non-intuitive) and ‘intuitive’ non-conceptual content.

Hopp's theory of non-conceptual content connects with two more general theses about the relation between thought and perception he wishes to uphold. The first of these is that thought and perception are *phenomenologically different* in relevant respects; the second that they differ in the kind of *epistemic contribution* they supply. Neither of these claims need, I think, surprise anyone. Regarding the first, it is hard to believe anyone would proclaim that to entertain a thought about the taste of a fine Burgundy pinot noir is in all introspective respects indistinguishable from the actual taste of it. Perception and thought are, quite obviously, experienced differently. Likewise, it seems no one would want to deny that merely to believe something to be the case generally will not establish anything about that thing's being the case and therefore will not yield a legitimate reason for believing so. Thinking about unicorns does give as good a reason for believing they exist as a perception of them would. However, Hopp is convinced that what he calls ‘experiential conceptualism’ – a variety of conceptualist doctrines such as those defended by John McDowell (1994, 2009) and Bill Brewer (1999) – is ‘utterly incapable of explaining why perceptual experiences play such a distinctive and privileged role in the production of knowledge’ (p.2). Part of the potential value of Hopp's central undertaking relies, as I will show, on the plausibility of this reading of conceptualism, which is one of the two doctrines he wants to reject. Hopp thinks (i) that McDowell cannot account for the specific kind of epistemic input only perception can offer (ii) that McDowell outright conflates thought and reality: he ‘obscure[s] the distinction between contents and objects of mental acts’ (p. 84). For McDowell, the worldly state of affairs ‘that things are thus and so’ is *also* a mental content,³ and for Hopp this shows that McDowell has not understood the basic structure of intentional experience, at least as proposed by the early Husserl. For these reasons, Hopp's defense of the phenomenological and epistemological

² See especially Schear's *McDowell/Dreyfus Debate* (2013) for an overview of contemporary discussions on non-conceptual content within phenomenology or my review of it (Van Mazijk 2014)

³ See (McDowell 1994, p. 26) for one of the most quoted fragments of *Mind and World*, on the basis of which many non-conceptualists have argued for a logical fallacy in McDowell's argumentative structure (e.g. Heck 2000, Peacocke 2001, Hopp 2010, 2011)

uniqueness of perception partially takes the form of an attack upon experiential conceptualism, which ultimately leads him to defend two notions of non-conceptual content.

The main argument against conceptualism Hopp puts forward draws on some of Husserl's early writings on the structure of fulfillment. Thoughts, according to Husserl, belong to the class of signitive or empty acts. In thinking about a white floor, I intend something emptily, that is, without the white floor being present to me 'in the flesh'. Intuitive acts, to the contrary, are characterized precisely by the kind of fulfillment thought lacks. Thought in fact *needs* to be fulfilled by perception. Thinking about a white floor and subsequently seeing it is what Husserl aptly calls a 'synthesis of recognition'⁴ between an empty signitive act and a fulfilling perceptive intention, i.e.: a synthesis that fulfills the emptiness of the thought by the actual givenness of the object. Thought can for that reason never play the justificatory role perception can, as Hopp illustrates multiple times:

I can see a floor, and I can see the property brown, but synthesizing the contents directed towards the two in thought will not add up to a perception that the floor is brown (p. 68)

I can compare my belief that an apple is red with the apple that is red, and when I do, I know something I would not have known merely by believing that that apple is red (p. 102)

Husserl's early theory of fulfillment offers an interesting perspective on the relation between perception and thought. The crucial difference between them is, as Hopp rightly points out, that perception offers a piece of the world, and without such a piece, a thought is merely empty. But that is in fact – at least in its general outline – an old Kantian idea, and so is the idea that perception and thought are fundamentally different – in Kant's case because they are taken to belong to two distinct sources. However, McDowell is also, in these respects at least, a Kantian. Hopp has to make it clear, then, why he believes conceptualism cannot pay homage to the idea that perception fulfills while mere thoughts are emptily intended, which is, as I see it, quite a serious accusation.

In Chapter 4, Hopp devotes considerable length to the development of a systematic argument that is to reveal why conceptualism fails to recognize the unique role of fulfillment perception plays. Hopp distinguishes two theses he takes McDowell to endorse of which he then shows the result to be untenable. The first is the detachability thesis (DT), according to which a conceptual content must be a detachable content, that is, it should be able to fulfill its function of representing objects, properties and/or states of affairs without the intuitive presence of those referents.⁵ There has, of course, been considerable debate over this in the context of McDowell's account of demonstrative concepts,⁶ but this is not so important here. The second thesis is the conceptualism premise (CP), which reads that the epistemic status of a belief is determined solely by that belief's conceptual content and the conceptual contents of mental states to which it

⁴ See also (p. 201–206) where Hopp distinguishes a number of different syntheses

⁵ Cf. also Evans's generality constraint (1982, pp. 100–105)

⁶ Cf. McDowell (1994, pp. 46–65) and Kelly (2001)

is inferentially related. But this, Hopp concludes, fails to account for the unique structure of perception. The argument again comes from the idea of fulfillment:

Suppose Jones believes that it has recently rained on the basis of (1) his perception that Beacon Street is wet and (2) his belief that if Beacon Street is wet, then it has recently rained. Now suppose we zap his perception and replace it with a mere belief with the same detachable content: Beacon Street is wet. In doing so, we also effectively annihilate his justification for believing that it has recently rained. But if CP were correct, and if the contents of perception were the same as those of possibly empty intentional states, then we would not have altered his justification in the slightest (p. 110)

It hardly requires elaboration that the fact about perception the argument is to establish should be granted. Perception has a *surplus* - that piece of the world which is *given* and not merely thought about by us. But this proposition is in fact so obvious that the philosophical importance of it must derive elsewhere – namely from McDowell's alleged incapability to account for it. That accusation, however, should strike us as absurd. Why would a philosopher like McDowell commit to such an obviously fallacious position? Why would *anyone* deny the difference between tasting a wine and just thinking about it? This seems to accuse McDowell of endorsing what Brandom calls 'hyperinferentialism' (Brandom 2001, pp. 219–220) which thinks of justification in terms of language-language moves only, thereby strongly suggesting an image of confinement within thinking. But McDowell knows well that in perception something is *given* while in thought there is not (McDowell 2009, p. 263). One in fact need only recall that the whole idea behind *Mind and World* is to provide a philosophical account of the relation between intuition and concept in an explicitly Kantian spirit, that is, in terms of a cooperation of the understanding and sensibility. Furthermore, it is said this account should improve upon Davidson's reading precisely by allowing a proper constraint to come from the world via intuition. To suggest that McDowell has forgotten to incorporate that basic Kantian idea which stipulates that specifically intuitions are necessary for any knowledgeable experience is, then, to deny the very core of his philosophical program. At times, it appears Hopp's attempt to reveal McDowell's allegedly flawed conceptualism in fact works against him by supporting the latter's doctrine. These are just two examples:

The reason I come to judge that the floor is white is because I have already perceived the floor's being white (p. 68)

Painting or seeing a color just is, already, painting or seeing something *as* colored. The 'being red' of the apple *just is* the distinctive way that redness and the apple belong together, a way that is made manifest in perception. *Absolutely nothing at the level of perception needs to change* when we thoughtfully articulate propositions that are fulfilled by it (p. 73 my italics)

These fragments do not contravene McDowell's position. In fact they give voice precisely to the conceptualist doctrine: that the relation between thought contents and perceptual contents does not 'set up links between the conceptual realm and something outside of it' (McDowell 1994, p. 166). Hopp is right that the reason I come to judge

the floor is white is that I perceive it to be that color. But that means I already see a white floor, something that is, at least, invested with some concepts,⁷ and, in any case, is open to being judged about. But that really is all McDowell intends to say: that the contents about which I can come to judge are already there in perception.

In the second part of *Perception and Knowledge*, Hopp deals with the other alternative to non-conceptual content, the so-called relational view (Campbell 2002), according to which external objects themselves figure in perception, such that perception has no need of representational content at all. Many interesting and provocative discussions can be found in this latter half of the book. Chapter five and six offer in depth and quite dense discussions of disjunctivism and the relational view of perception. Given Hopp's emphasis on fulfillment as the distinctive characteristic of perception, one might expect him to be favorable of a relational view to the extent that it too stresses the importance of a confrontation with something external to the mind for the structure of perception (Campbell 2002, pp. 114–116). It seems that fulfillment, although a characteristic of the structure of intentionality and the mental contents it brings about, implies that a part of the outer world is given which is doing the filling up. But Hopp asserts, rightly to my mind, that relationalism puts too much weight on the objective side, and therefore cannot do justice to the complex intentional functions involved in perceptual consciousness, such as time consciousness, embodiment and horizons (161–170). Hopp's case is, I think, that the relational view puts physical objects in the place where there really are intentional contents.⁸ It makes objects themselves figure in experience. The relational view (at least Campbell's) is committed to the idea that solely objective properties can determine experience, such that two persons experiencing the same things may well have exactly the same phenomenal contents. But that is basically to neglect all the internal phenomenological processes and mental contents that enable perception to be about objects.

From these attempted rebuttals of conceptualism and the relational view, Hopp sets out to develop his two notions of non-conceptual content. The first is, if I understand him correctly, the kind of intuitive non-conceptual content that makes fulfillment possible, which he earlier exploited in his case against conceptualism. This argument also recurs in his explanation of the different epistemic roles perception with its degrees of fullness and thought with its empty signification play. The second kind of non-conceptual content Hopp calls – drawing once more upon Husserl's phenomenological work – 'horizontal content'. Husserl believed perception always represents more than what is actually given. Although I only see one side of the cup of coffee on my desk, I am intentionally related to it as a whole, in part because I apperceive its other sides. Likewise, some of the things that surround the object, as well as certain anticipations and future possibilities for action, are co-intended. These horizons change incessantly and it is mainly for that reason that they cannot be conceptual contents (p. 147–148), since the latter are '*representatio universalis*'. This argument seems valid, and hence horizontal content is non-conceptual at least in the sense just specified. Unfortunately, however, Hopp appears to leave a more interesting question unanswered, namely

⁷ As is well known, McDowell nuanced his views about the extent to which concepts can figure in perception in his later works on pressure of Travis (2004). His claim about perception being open to conceptualization has remained unaltered

⁸ Note that this is also a main theme in the first sections of Husserl's Fifth *Logical Investigations*

whether horizons could still be permeated with rationality in another sense. For instance, in looking at my cup of coffee, I (arguably) see it *as* a cup of coffee. Not only do I apperceive its backside, I also see that which it is good for. My eyes might quickly be drawn by some part of it that has dark coffee stains, and I might be reminded vaguely that I should clean it sometime soon. I might also instead passively co-intend a possible action of walking to the cafeteria to refill it, or make a series of passive associations that lead me (perhaps strangely to my mind) to become suddenly conscious that my mouth is dry. Interestingly, all these horizontal connections seem to be invested with second nature. So the question remains open whether horizons could be conceptual in another sense, namely in being entrenched with second nature.

All in all, Hopp's book is a deep and technical engagement with difficult issues in phenomenology and epistemology that offers loads of useful insights and clever phenomenological analyses. As such, it should be of interest both to phenomenologists and epistemologists working on issues of perception and/or justification. But in spite of many rich and lengthy analyses, I am not entirely convinced that *Perception and Knowledge* does its job a whole lot better than the alternatives it aims to replace. The most perplexing of all questions about perception and knowledge, it would seem to me, concerns *how* the former enables the latter. In Husserlian vocabulary, this question reads how fulfillment *itself* is possible. Clearly, in order to answer that question, it cannot be sufficient to merely draw upon the idea of fulfillment. Although commonly misunderstood, McDowell's conceptualism does aim to answer a big chunk of that crucial question. Hopp's account of horizontal non-intuitive and intuitive non-conceptual content, by contrast, does not seem to address the specifically *genetic* dimension of the question about non-conceptual content – which is also central to McDowell's interpretation. This genetic question asks whether these contents are already informed by and to that extent possibly conditioned by rationality, that is: whether the perceptually given table which fulfills my thought of it is itself already conditioned by the understanding. As Husserl scholars will know, *Experience and Judgment* (1997) might just represent Husserl's best attempt to answer that question, given to us through his detailed descriptions of how receptivity and spontaneity intertwine in passive and active synthesis. Perhaps the early theory of fulfillment, in this respect, does not mark the end of this discussion after all – whether in Husserl scholarship or in contemporary phenomenologically oriented epistemology – but rather its beginning.

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