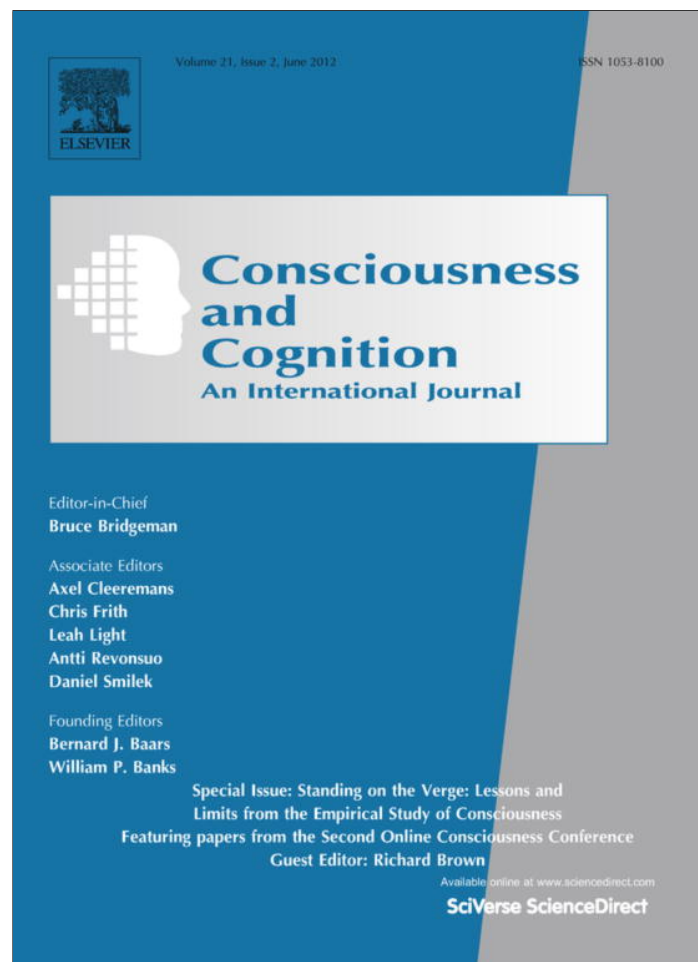


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Reply

Mental colors, conceptual overlap, and discriminating knowledge of particulars[☆]

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ABSTRACT

I respond to the separate commentaries by Jacob Berger, Charlie Pelling, and David Pereplyotchik on my paper, “Color-Consciousness Conceptualism.” I resist Berger’s suggestion that mental colors ever enter consciousness without accompaniment by deployments of concepts of their extra-mental counterparts. I express concerns about Pelling’s proposal that a more uniform conceptualist treatment of phenomenal sorites can be gained by a simple appeal to the partial overlap of the extensions of some concepts. I question the relevance to perceptual consciousness of the arguments for demonstrative concepts that Pereplyotchik attacks.

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1. Are mental colors ever conceptualized without color concepts?

I regard conceptualism as exhausted by two exclusive theses, the matching thesis and the exhaustion thesis (Mandik, 2011, p. xxx). I take it that Berger (2011) is attracted to a view that is closer to the matching thesis than the exhaustion thesis, but is neither, and thus, not a variety of conceptualism.

A central example of Berger’s is a conscious sensation of red that, had in a state of post-nap befuddlement, is unaccompanied by any thought as elaborate as “this is a sensation as if there were a red thing in my perceptible environment.” Of course, on the higher-order thought theory of consciousness that Berger evinces sympathy for (Rosenthal, 2005), any such conscious sensation must be accompanied by some concept or other. Another view that Berger is sympathetic to is that there are such properties as mental red as well as concepts thereof. It’s open, then, that the relevant concept deployed by the befuddled napper immediately upon waking is MENTAL RED. I worry, though, that given the higher sophistication required in grasping MENTAL RED as opposed to RED, it is more probable that the just-woken dozer conceptualizes the relevant event as involving red rather than as involving mental red.

Let us suppose, however, that MENTAL RED is indeed the concept deployed. Berger correctly reports that I have wondered out loud in personal communication whether such a deployment thereby involves the concept RED. If one were inclined to the view that at least some concepts have components that are themselves concepts (and remember, denying such a view leaves one quite vulnerable to the diachronic indistinguishability argument), then perhaps MENTAL RED is a nice example of a conceptual complex, and further, has RED as a component. Part of Berger’s response to such a possibility is to point out that it is not obvious that this is what actually happens. I am tempted to respond that it need not be obvious to be true. However, this is not an interesting way to proceed. What would be interesting, though beyond the scope of the present project (and my present capability!), would be to supply a means for deciding empirically between our competing hypotheses.

[☆] Reply to commentaries on Berger, J. (2012). Do we conceptualize every color we consciously discriminate?. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21, 632–635; Pereplyotchik, D. (2012). Why believe in demonstrative concepts? *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21, 636–638; Pelling, C. (2012). Indiscriminability, Indeterminacy, and Overlap. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21, 639–640. This article is part of a special issue of this journal on Standing on the Verge: Lessons and Limits from the Empirical study of Consciousness.

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2. How much explanatory force can the conceptualist squeeze out of the bare notion of overlap?

One of the central notions I rely on in explicating how a conceptualist can respond to indiscriminability arguments is the notion of the *indeterminacy* of certain conceptual representations. One can conceptualize a color sample as a shade of blue without thereby committing to which maximally determinate shade of blue it is. Pelling (2011) correctly points out that indeterminacy alone cannot explain what needs explaining: Representing one chip as blue and another as red might involve tokening two indeterminate conceptual representations, but a puzzle remains if one nonetheless failed to distinguish the chips with respect to their color. Fortunately, there are other resources in the conceptualist strategy. One concerns a notion of what Pelling calls “overlap.” As Pelling makes explicit, and as I take it was implicit in my account, distinct yet indiscriminable shades may be conceptualized under representations that partially overlap in their extensions, whereas correctly discriminated shades are represented by non-overlapping representations.

I have offered that the conceptualist needs different strategies for dealing with the different kinds of phenomenal sorites series. Pelling suggests instead that a more uniform account than mine can be achieved by leaning more heavily on a notion of overlap. However, I am skeptical that such a result is forthcoming. While an explanation couched almost solely in terms of overlap does quite well with respect to a very small series, problems arise when we turn to the very large ones. Consider, for example, a 34-item series wherein the endpoints are red and yellow respectively. To appreciate what the problem is, consider a 3-item series and note what the essential form of the overlap-only explanation is: For colors A, B, and C, there are three representation types tokened, A*, B*, and C*, such that A* and B* overlap, B* and C* overlap, and A* and C* do not overlap. If this is to be a version of conceptualism, then A*, B*, and C* are conceptual representations. Are they themselves concepts? If so, then we are getting close to what the problem is, for on the face of it, it seems that the explanation is committing to there being as many concepts as items in the sorites series. And for the 34-item series, the commitment then is to 34 distinct concepts for each of the various determinate shades of yellow, orange, and red that make up the series. Old worries arise now about whether anyone’s conceptual repertoire is so replete.

To avoid such problems, I have recommended that we note how a wide variety of things represented can be captured by a small store of combinable concepts. The 34 items in our target series can be subsumed under combinations involving one or more of the five concepts, RED, YELLOW, ORANGE, REDDER-THAN, and YELLOWER-THAN. Already we are adding more to our explanatory resources than a bare appeal to overlap. Further, we will also need to appeal to considerations that will make it plausible that, at one or more points in a diachronic series, one and the same item is represented in different ways at different times (see Section 8.2.4 of my target article). For such reasons I view the notion of overlap as useful, but in danger of being oversold.

3. Does perceptual phenomenal character constitute discriminating knowledge of particulars?

I have been centrally concerned in the target article to defend a version of conceptualism that does not bother to invoke so-called demonstrative concepts. My interest in non-demonstrative conceptualism is somewhat narrow in that I am interested in conceptualism concerning conscious perceptual states, especially as regards phenomenal character. Arguments aiming to establish demonstrative aspects of mentality outside of either consciousness or perception are of little interest to the present project. Perhaps Pereplyotchik (2011) is right that it is not enough to supply an explanation of the target phenomena that does not appeal to demonstrative concepts, and that the arguments for demonstrative concepts must themselves be countered. However, I want to briefly remark here on the relevance, or lack thereof, of such arguments to an explanation of perceptual consciousness.

I will focus here on the argument of Brewer’s (1999) that Pereplyotchik discusses. Central to Brewer’s argument is the relation of perception to *discriminating knowledge of particulars*. The knowledge in question concerns knowing of a particular *which* particular it is. The gist of Brewer’s argument, as I understand it, is that certain perceptual states in themselves constitute discriminating knowledge of particulars, and that non-demonstrative descriptive content is impotent to secure such knowledge because any such description of a particular is impotent to distinguish it from some qualitatively identical but numerically distinct particular. Whatever the merits of such an argument (and Pereplyotchik is convincing in his case that it has little merit) it strikes me as doubtful that it should fall within the scope of a discussion of the character of perceptual consciousness.

Consider a conscious perception of some particular tomato as being red. There is, in the Nagelian phrase, *something it’s like* to be in such a conscious perceptual state. However, just as there can be numerically distinct tomatoes that nonetheless share their perceptible properties, there is little reason to suppose it impossible for there to be numerically distinct conscious perceptions of the respective tomatoes that share their phenomenal properties. That is, there is little reason to suppose that it’s impossible that what it’s like to have a conscious perception of one of the tomatoes is just like what it’s like to have a conscious perception of one of the others. Thus, there’s little reason to suppose that merely in virtue of the phenomenal character of some conscious perceptual state we thereby have discriminating knowledge of a particular. If we do ever have discriminating knowledge of a particular, it seems more likely to be due to something other than the phenomenal character of a perceptual state. It would perhaps be due to some co-occurring thought, a thought that need not be either a perceptual state or a conscious one.

It might be objected against me that my point is plausible only with respect to the particular that I have focused on in my example. Perhaps there is some other particular that I have discriminating knowledge of merely by having a conscious perceptual state with such-and-such phenomenal character. Perhaps I myself am a particular that I have discriminating knowledge of by being in such a state. Some philosophers may find it intuitive to claim that there can be no serious doubt in my mind, in having a conscious perceptual state, as to which person is having such a state. Perhaps such a claim is true, but much more needs to be said to make it convincing that this would be true because of a contribution from *perceptual phenomenal character*. It would need to be ruled out that the ground of such certainty is coming instead from something external to perceptual phenomenal character, for instance, some co-occurring thought to the effect that it is I who is the subject of the perceptual state.

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