

The Generality Constraint – vertical, not horizontal

Following Gareth Evans (1982, ch. 4.3), the Generality Constraint has been proposed by many (Peacocke, Heck, Byrne, Camp, etc.) as providing the crucial demarcation between conceptual and non-conceptual content and/or states. And there has been quite extensive discussion about whether perceptual contents and/or states satisfy this criterion and, thus, are conceptual or not.

Usually the Generality Constraint is put in the form of a certain systematicity or recombining requirement on conceptual representations and/or abilities. The standard way of formulating the Generality Constraint is 'horizontal', as I would like to call it. It requires that the thinker be able to form a new combination of subject concept and predicate concept. For example, if a thinker can think the thought that a is red and the thought that b is green, then she can also think the thought that a is green (and that b is red). We can freely recombine subject concepts and predicate concepts, whereas this is allegedly not possible in the realm of perceptual representation.

This way of conducting the debate about nonconceptual representation, however, has led to curious discussions. Defenders of the non-conceptuality of perceptual experience have tried to provide cases in which the horizontal Generality Constraint is supposedly violated. Surprisingly, these cases are far-fetched and hard to get a grasp on. They are not always described in sufficient detail, and one is somehow left in the dark about what to think about them. For example, Christopher Peacocke (1994) appeals to the case of a subject who can think that an object is green and in a dark room simultaneously, but cannot perceive it as green and as being in a dark room simultaneously. It is unclear, however, what it means to perceive an object as being in a dark room. How about perceiving it as having a very dark green color? Or is there a certain ambiguity in the description 'being in a dark room'? Things are far from clear.

I will argue that the problem is symptomatic. Conceived in the horizontal way, the Generality Constraint cannot do the job it is meant to do, namely, to decide the issue of whether perceptual contents and/or states are conceptual or not. For, the horizontal understanding of the Generality Constraint either makes it trivially false that perceptual states/contents do not satisfy it; or it makes it trivially true. Thus, no interesting work is done by the criterion, if conceived in this horizontal way. For, it is unclear what it means to 'represent a as F' or to 'represent that a is F'. One must represent a in a certain sense in order to 'represent a as F' or to 'represent that a is F'. To represent a, however, is object representation (representation of the particular object, say, the Eiffel Tower). But then it all depends on whether perceptual representation allows for such object representation. One either has the intuition that object representation in perception is not possible at all, since perceptual representation is always just predicative (and there is only some kind of reference to objects, fixed by causal-contextual factors). Or one has the intuition that object representation in perception is no problem, and quite ubiquitous, since one can certainly see or hear a particular object – and that is good enough. Correspondingly, one either concludes that one can never 'represent a as F' or 'represent that a is F' in perception, and thus the Generality Constraint is of course not satisfied by perceptual representation. Or one concludes that the Generality Constraint is easily satisfied, since one can of course see a ball as green if one can see a ball as red and can see a square as green. Thus, the Generality Constraint is either trivially false or

trivially true of perceptual representation. It all depends on what one thinks about object representation.

Taking up an idea by Jerry Fodor (2007), I propose, in contrast, to take the Generality Constraint in a 'vertical' way. As Fodor notes, conceptual ('discursive') representations admit of a privileged de-composition, whereas non-conceptual ('iconic') representations do not – they lead to sub-representations which all have the same semantic role. Generalizing from this observation we can introduce a 'vertical' Generality Constraint. Thus, it becomes a requirement of generality on the *kinds of semantic roles* of representations that one be able to produce if one is to possess a certain concept. In general, a conceptual representation has a representational content and a semantic role within the thought in which it is employed. The thinker who has a certain concept of X (of redness, of happiness, etc.) is able to produce (conceptual) representations (of X) with varying semantic roles. She is able to represent redness in the predicative role, but also in the subject role – within various different thoughts. These representations have the same representational content (they are of X) but different semantic roles. For example, if one possesses the concept of redness, one can think that one's shoe is red. But one can also think that redness is a color (property). In the former thought, one employs the concept of redness in a predicate semantic role; in the latter thought, in the semantic role of a subject. This is true of concepts in general, I submit. (Another example I would like to discuss is the thought that existence exists, expressed by Grossmann (1992). This will bring up the issue of incoherent representation and 'categorical appropriateness' mentioned already by Evans in a footnote (Evans 1982, p. 101.)

Non-conceptual representation is not general in this vertical sense. It is restricted essentially to just one semantic role – the predicative role in the case of perceptual representation.

References:

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Fodor, J. (2007), „The revenge of the Given“, in: *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*, edited by B. McLaughlin, J. Cohen, Blackwell, 105-116.
Grossmann, R. (1992), *The Existence of The World*, Routledge.
Peacocke, Chr. (1994), „Non-conceptual content: kinds, rationales and relations“, *Mind and Language* 9, 419-429.