

Response to Stella González Arnal

1. One thing one might mean by talking of a tacit dimension to our experiential engagement with the world is that the conceptual capacities that are operative in perceptually taking in features of reality depend on background knowledge.

For example, Sellars argues that our ability to experience things as having colours depends on our knowing the difference between lighting conditions that are appropriate for telling what colours things have by looking and lighting conditions that are not. I discuss this dependency in my response to Costas Pagondiotis. As I acknowledge there, this background knowledge may be a purely practical ability to discriminate appropriate from inappropriate conditions. Making the discrimination need not be a matter of applying an explicitly endorsed theory.

I formulated this interpretation for talk of a tacit dimension in terms of a condition on the *conceptual* capacities that are operative in our experience. We can accept that a not necessarily articulated background can stand in this kind of relation to our experience, and consistently go on to hold that the content of our experience itself — what our experience reveals to us, or at least purports to reveal to us, about our environment — is determined by the operation in experience of capacities that are conceptual. A background needed for our experience to have the content it has is not, as such, part of the content of the experience for whose possibility it is a condition.

2. We come closer to something that might look like a reason for supposing our experience has content that is not, at any rate not fully, conceptual when we consider something else one might mean by talking of a tacit dimension to our experiential engagement with the world: namely, that we are not focally aware of everything we are aware of when we engage with the world, as González Arnal puts it following Polanyi. On this interpretation for talk of a tacit dimension, what belongs to the tacit dimension is part of experiential content. If this part of experiential content is not fully conceptual, it follows that experiential content is not fully conceptual.

González Arnal quotes Polanyi writing about the pressure in the palm of one's hand that is part of what one is aware of when one is wielding a hammer. To use a hammer skilfully, one must keep such elements of one's awareness in the background. If one's attention is drawn to them, it is thereby

drawn away from what it needs to be directed at if one is to exercise the skill, say the position of the nail one is hammering. The result is that the skilled performance is disrupted.

But why should we suppose this is a case of experiential content that is not fully conceptual?

González Arnal gives two reasons: first, that our awareness of these elements is not focal, and, second, that it cannot be linguistically articulated.

She does not explain why she thinks the non-focal character of this kind of awareness is a reason for saying it is not fully conceptual. Clearly everything turns here on what we mean by talking of actualizations of conceptual capacities. It is not that what capacities are conceptual is agreed on all hands, but substantive disputes open up about the nature of this supposedly common subject matter. What is needed is to motivate a specific way of using the notion of a conceptual capacity, perhaps on the ground of its utility in clarifying some region of philosophical difficulty.

For my part, I find it helpful to make a close connection between the idea of operations of conceptual capacities and the idea of rationality in a strict sense. In having the content it has, our experience makes, or at least purports to make, features of reality available to the rationality that is involved in forming, maintaining, and correcting beliefs. Given the connection between conceptual capacities and rationality, to attribute that role to experience is, near enough, to say what González Arnal questions: that conceptual capacities, in the relevant sense, enter into experience's having the content it has. If some feature of reality is only non-focally available to a subject's doxastic rationality in a given experience, why should that seem to make any difference? If the feature is present in experience at all, it is *available* to serve as rational input to one's doxastic rationality, whether one's attention is directed to it or not. All that would be required for one's awareness of a non-focally experienced feature of one's situation — say, the pressure exerted by the hammer on the palm of one's hand — to make an actual impingement on one's doxastic rationality, perhaps to persuade one to an explicit endorsement of a claim about the pressure on one's palm, would be a shift of attention. Why should we suppose a shift of attention would transform content that is not fully conceptual into content that is fully conceptual?

It may seem that this question is answered by the second of González Arnal's reasons, the claim that our awareness of these elements cannot be linguistically articulated. It is certainly true that I try to capture the connection of the conceptual, as I use that idea, with rationality in a strict sense by invoking language. (Here I follow Sellars's picture of the logical space of reasons, which he describes as the space "of justifying and being able to justify what one says".) If it were true that the non-focal experiential content we are considering here could not be linguistically articulated, that would be a ground for saying it cannot be conceptual in my sense.

But all that González Arnal can genuinely claim to establish in this area is that the content she is discussing cannot *both* be linguistically articulated *and* retain its status as present to the subject only non-focally. That is not at all the same as showing that the content in question cannot be linguistically articulated. And in fact content of this kind can be linguistically articulated. It *is* linguistically articulated, for instance by Polanyi. Certainly once it is linguistically articulated, it can no longer be fulfilling its function as unattended-to background for focal awareness of something else, say, a nail that one is hammering. But now we can pose a counterpart to the question that arose in connection with the first of González Arnal's two reasons, the question that was supposed to be answered by these considerations about linguistic articulability. Why should it seem that a shift of some experiential content, say the content of one's awareness of pressure in one's palm, from unattended-to background to focused-on foreground would transform content that is not fully conceptual into content that is fully conceptual?

3. I conceded that the ability to discriminate good from bad lighting conditions for telling what colours things have by looking that figures in the background of colour experience, according to Sellars, need not be a matter of explicitly endorsing a theory. But a point like the one I have just been making applies here too. The concession is that one can have the conceptual capacities in question, capacities to recognize colours on sight, without having expressly articulated the facts about good lighting conditions that one needs to know one's way around in order to have those conceptual capacities. It does not follow that that background knowledge is incapable of being linguistically articulated.

My point in §1 above did not require me to question the assumption that the required background knowledge, in that kind of case, is not conceptual. Even if the background knowledge were not conceptual, that would not imply that the content of the experience that is conditioned by that background knowledge is not conceptual. But we are now in a position to see that if knowledge is marked out as conceptual by the possibility of articulating it, the assumption is open to question too.

4. González Arnal's baker exemplifies a different kind of case. His experience of the feel of the dough is of course conditioned by his acquired skill at bread-making. This is a partial counterpart to the way in which colour experience is conditioned by knowledge about lighting conditions, and to that extent the example belongs with the one I considered in §1 above. But it is the content of the baker's apprehension of the situation, rather than the background needed for his apprehension to have the content it does, that González Arnal claims is not conceptual, on the ground that the baker cannot articulate it.

However, she herself envisages the baker saying that the dough feels right, and that is surely an articulation of how it feels to him. The articulation is admittedly not very specific. But why should that matter?

I think it is beside the point that the baker may not be in command of terms such as “firm” or “resilient” — terms with which someone might try, surely in vain, to construct written instructions for kneading bread dough that would preempt any need for learning by practice, through trial and error or from a master. If he cares, a master baker might try to acquire, or devise, terms that work in the way those terms would. (Consider the conceptual innovativeness that is called for in serious connoisseurship of, say, wine.) Certainly a baker need not care about using terms of that sort to describe the feel he goes by in deciding when dough is ready. But if he really is a skilled baker, he had better have knowledge that he could formulate, at the right moment in the midst of a bout of bread-making, by saying something like “The dough is ready when it feels like *this*”. (Perhaps he is mute? Well, it is not hard to imagine gestural communication that would demand an interpretation on those lines. Communication need not be verbal to be linguistic in the relevant sense.) In the right circumstances, saying something on those lines would give as specific an expression as one could ask for to a conceptual capacity that is operative in his experience of the way the dough feels.

5. I have objected to González Arnal’s claim that the kind of experiential content she considers is beyond the reach of linguistic articulation. But apart from that, I am not objecting to the substance of what she wants to say about experiential content. I think the considerations she adduces should not be seen as telling against the idea that the content of our experience is fully conceptual. We can leave that idea in place, and let her considerations serve rather to undermine a certain conception of the conceptual, one according to which actualizations of conceptual capacities are operations of a pure intellect, independent of ordinary capacities for practical engagement with reality.

The claim about articulability that I have resisted belongs in the context of that conception of the conceptual. It reflects a corresponding view of what counts as linguistic articulation. When we resist that conception of the conceptual, we should equally resist a view of linguistic articulation according to which uses of language that partly owe their significance to their users’ immersion in practical life, such as the baker’s use of “feels like *this*”, cannot count as linguistic articulations of the content they express — as if linguistic articulation would require words to do all the work of expression by themselves, without help from the lived-in situations in which we speak.

JOHN MCDOWELL