How to Think about Nonconceptual Content

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The current debate over nonconceptual content is of fundamental importance for both phenomenology and the theory of knowledge. It is, moreover, an area in which phenomenologists working within a broadly Husserlian tradition can and have made important contributions.\(^1\) Despite this, the debate as a whole remains something of a mess. Consider, for instance, this rather standard definition of nonconceptual content: “X is in a state with nonconceptual content iff X does not have to possess the concepts that characterize its content in order to be in that state.”\(^2\) As many times as I read that statement (and others like it), I have trouble understanding what it says. First, it is unclear whether it defines a special kind of state or a special kind of content.\(^3\) Apart from that ambiguity, what is a content? And what is a concept? What is it to possess one? And what is it to characterize one? And what, finally, is the phenomenological basis of any of these concepts? My goal here is to provide the beginnings of a phenomenological account of conceptual and nonconceptual content and a couple of considerations in favor of the latter’s existence.

§ 1. Act, Content, Object

In contemporary philosophy, the term ‘content’ is often a catchall term that designates just whatever is related to minds in any way whatsoever. Sometimes it means the object of an intentional experience, what it is about. And sometimes it means something

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like a Fregean sense, which is about the object of an intentional experience and related in some way—a way almost never specified—to the experience itself. Calling contents “representational contents” leaves this ambiguity intact, since ‘representational’ is subject to the –ing/-ed ambiguity. Are such contents represented, or representing? Robert Hanna uses the term ‘content’ for both sorts of things: “Broadly speaking, the mental content of an animal’s conscious mental state is what that state refers to or describes, and how it does so.”4 Unless the what of a conscious state is always identical with its how—and if it were, the definition above would be redundant—following this terminological practice cannot fail to produce at least some confusion. And it doesn’t seem at all obvious that they are identical. For instance, I can be conscious of my kitchen by thinking about it, remembering it, perceiving it, imagining it, and so on, but these are not differences in the object of which I am conscious, but the manner in which I am conscious of it. And when I perceive a friend, the thing I perceive is something whose hand I could shake. But I could not shake hands with how my perceptual state refers to him.

Virtually everyone acknowledges that, at least in wide range of cases, there is a clear distinction between a mental act and its object. My act of thinking about the Great Wall of China is not a wall, is not in China, and isn’t particularly great. And it’s about something, while the Great Wall is not. But this distinction isn’t nearly enough. Rather, we must recognize something in addition to the object of my act and the act itself, namely the act’s content. This is so for three reasons.

The first traditional reason for distinguishing contents and objects is that some acts of thinking, desiring, hoping, and perhaps even perceiving are about objects that do not exist. Such acts could not be individuated by their objects. If a child wants Santa Claus to come to his house tonight, what he wants is a certain state of affairs—Santa Claus’s coming to his house—and that, along with its star constituent, does not and will never exist.

A second traditional reason for believing in contents is that the same object can be represented via different modes of presentation. The sentence “Silver conducts electricity”

4 Robert Hanna, ”Kantian Non-conceptualism,” Philosophical Studies 137 (2008), 41-64, here 42. Also see Christopher Peacocke, ”Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?,” The Journal of Philosophy 98 (2001), 239-264, here 241.
is about the very same state of affairs as the sentence “The element with 47 protons in its nucleus has numerous free electrons.” But the sentences don’t mean the same thing. Furthermore, any object that can be presented perceptually can also be merely thought about, and there are massive and obvious differences between those ways of being conscious of an object. I can see my couch, or I can merely think about it. This is not a difference in the object; when I think about it, I’m evidently thinking of the very same object that I just perceived. And, contrary to one line of thinking, perception and thought are not distinguished by their respective fineness of grain, that is, by how determinately they represent their objects. That distinction cuts right across the distinction between thinking and perceiving. Perception often presents us with very determinate properties for which we do not have general concepts. And very often we can think about properties that we could not perceive. I can think that an object is square without being able to perceive that it is—because, for instance, I can conceptually but not perceptually distinguish between a side’s being 100 centimeters long and 101 centimeters long. And as one thinks of an object more and more determinately—‘Mars is a physical object’; ‘Mars is a planet’; ‘Mars is an uninhabited planet’—one doesn’t come any closer to perceiving. “Empty intentions,” writes Husserl, “can also be determinate.”

A third reason for recognizing contents is that there seem to be certain sorts of entities which philosophers, psychologists, semanticists, and logicians regularly and justifiably invoke that (a) play a critical role in a variety of mental activities but (b) are not normally the objects of thought and experience. Concepts and propositions are among the most conspicuous. When the content of my mental state is the proposition that Beethoven is a great composer, what I am thinking of is not this proposition, but a certain state of affairs, among whose constituents is Beethoven himself. The proposition is about

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6 Though both terms, and especially ‘proposition’, are themselves party to the content/object confusion. By a ‘proposition’, I will generally mean what Fregeans and Husserlians mean by it, namely a structured body of senses which represents objects (the True or the False, for orthodox Fregeans, and a state of affairs (Sachverhalt), for Husserlians).
something, but what I am thinking about is not in turn about something. And my act of thinking is about the same thing that the proposition is about, and the proposition is not, like certain well-known deviants, about itself. Again, when I think that water is wet, I employ the concept of water in order to think about water, not the concept of water. Just as we typically talk with, rather than about, sentences, so we typically think with, rather than about, contents.

Contents must also be distinguished from the acts whose contents they are. Mental acts are particular, dateable individual episodes that belong exclusively to one subject. My act of thinking that Beethoven is a great composer arose and passed away in time. But its content—the proposition that Beethoven is a great composer, along with the concepts making that proposition up—did not arise and pass away with my act of thinking. Many mental acts may have the same content. The concept of water and the proposition that water is wet are not anyone’s private property.

These distinctions should strike us as natural, since we easily draw them all the time in the case of massively simpler representational devices such as books, advertisements, computer files, and other vehicles of information. I just saw several posters alerting the neighborhood of a missing kitten and asking for help in finding her. Each of these posters has the same words and pictures (types, not tokens) on them. Each poster is about the missing kitten rather than those words and pictures. And each is about the missing kitten in virtue of containing those words and pictures. The words and pictures, finally, are not identical with any one poster. Each individual poster shares them in common, without being about them. Those are the posters’ contents, the having of which accounts for the fact that each of the posters represents its objects in the precise way that it does. Similar distinctions can be made with respect to mental acts. I conclude, then, that Husserl is right when he writes: “Since such talk is so highly ambiguous, we shall do well never to speak of an intentional content where an intentional object is meant, but to call the latter the intentional object of the act in question.”

§ 2. Concepts

The term ‘concept’ is also ambiguous. On the one hand, a concept is, as David Wiggins puts it, “something with instances” that “belongs on the level of reference.” On the other hand, in its “Kantian” use, the term ‘concept’ belongs on the level of sense. Unlike Wiggins (and Frege), it seems rather clear to me that the latter meaning is the more prevalent. The concept of plaid is not the property plaid, for instance. Most plaid things, such as tartan scarves, do not possess the concept of plaid. And most of the things that possess the concept of plaid are not plaid. Concepts, moreover, are of or about things, while properties, quite typically, are not. As such, I will understand concepts and conceptual contents to be a type of intentional content.

It is also important to distinguish the property of being conceptual and the property of being conceptualized. To say that something is conceptualized is, minimally, to say that someone is conscious of that object by means of exercising a concept of it. For instance, when I think that water is wet, water is conceptualized. But I don’t, in conceptualizing water, conceptualize the concept of water. Concepts in use, like contents generally, are self-effacing, and when I employ the concept of water, it modestly directs my mind, not to itself, but to water. In order to conceptualize the concept of water, I would have to exercise a concept of it, namely the concept of the concept of water. And even if I do conceptualize the concept of water when I think of water, we’ll be on the brink of a vicious regress if we insist that the concept by whose means I do that—the concept of the concept of water—is also conceptualized. Eventually that regress must end with an unconceptualized concept.

On the other hand, water is not conceptual, and neither are most of the ordinary things we think and talk about. (Of course we can think and talk about contents too, but in such acts they are not functioning as contents, but as the objects of other contents.) There are no conceptual trees or cats or lakes; conceptuality just isn’t the kind of property that can intelligibly be attributed to such things. What is conceptual, in this example, is the content by whose means I conceptualize water, namely the concept of water.

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Unless some rather robust version of idealism is true, being conceptualized is not an intrinsic or essential property of an object. Water does not change, as far as we can tell, in any way whatsoever as a result of being conceptualized (or not). Being conceptual, on the other hand, is an intrinsic property of contents. Concepts, which are a type of content, are intrinsically conceptual. Michael Huemer, on the other hand, writes, “Conceptuality is not an intrinsic property of a content. Rather, it is a way that a content can be entertained. One can entertain a content conceptually (by means of concepts) or nonconceptually (not by means of concepts).” It seems clear that here Huemer means ‘object’ by ‘content’, and ‘being conceptualized’ for ‘conceptuality’. Otherwise, his would be the position that when I think of water by means of the concept ‘water’, but without conceptualizing the concept itself, the concept ‘water’ is a nonconceptual content. That, I suggest, is not the result we want.

That something doesn’t become conceptual in virtue of being conceptualized is, finally, clear from the fact that in thinking, speaking, and judging about a content of an experience, it doesn’t follow as a matter of course that it is a conceptual content, even though it is conceptualized. An utterance of the statement “C is a nonconceptual content” is not a pragmatic contradiction, and to my knowledge no one has leveled such an objection against the defenders of nonconceptual content. Yet it would be if being conceptualized entailed being conceptual.

Some contents are concepts, and some contents, such as propositions, contain concepts as constituents. My understanding throughout will be that a content is conceptual just in case it is of that sort, and nonconceptual otherwise. Mental states can be either conceptual, nonconceptual, or, as in the cases of fulfillment to be discussed below, both, depending on what sorts of contents they have. But just what is a concept or a conceptual content? I suggest we start by looking at a few relatively uncontroversial claims about conceptual contents. Paradigmatically, conceptual contents are what we employ in thinking and judging. Christopher Peacocke writes:

I shall be taking it that conceptual content is content of a kind that can be the content of judgment and belief. Concepts are constituents of those intentional contents which can be the complete, truth-evaluable, contents of judgment and belief.\textsuperscript{10}

If we understand propositions to be those truth-evaluable intentional contents to which Peacocke is referring, then concepts are constituents of propositions. Conceptual contents, then, are either concepts or wholes composed of concepts. And, since the content (matter) of a thought is independent of its quality or assertoric force, concepts are also constituents of questions, commands, and at least some “mere” presentations.

Another widely endorsed thesis concerning conceptual contents is that any linguistically expressible content is conceptual. Alex Byrne writes, “Since everyone agrees that propositions expressed by sentences are of a kind that can be believed, linguistic content is automatically conceptual.”\textsuperscript{11} And Peacocke writes, “any content that can be expressed in language by the use of an indicative sentence, including sentences containing indexicals and demonstratives, will be a conceptual content.”\textsuperscript{12} Of course, a content which is expressed by a word or sentence is not, in most cases, what the word or sentence is about. The word ‘water’ expresses the concept of water, but is about water. And the English sentence “Water is wet” expresses a meaningful proposition whose constituents are concepts. But it is not about a meaningful proposition or any concepts, but rather a state of affairs whose constituents are water and wetness.

In a nutshell, then, conceptual contents are the stuff of thought and talk. These two truisms about conceptual content do not, in themselves, tell us much, or at least not much that is obviously relevant about the phenomenology of conceptual content. But when we consider them in conjunction with some rather uncontroversial phenomenological facts, and when we consider the sorts of mental states that are the best candidates for having nonconceptual content, they are quite helpful. In particular, these claims about conceptual content hook up in interesting ways with a distinction that, to phenomenologists, is rather

\textsuperscript{10} Peacocke, “Nonconceptual Content?,” 243.

\textsuperscript{11} Alex Byrne, “Perception and Conceptual Content,” in M. Steup and E. Sosa, eds., \textit{Contemporary Debates in Epistemology} (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 231-250, here 234.

\textsuperscript{12} Peacocke, “Nonconceptual Content?,” 243.
more familiar: the distinction between signitive or empty and intuitive acts.

There is a vast difference between merely thinking that my table is messy, without perceiving or otherwise intuiting (by imagining or pictorially remembering) it, and perceiving or otherwise intuiting that my table is messy. The states of affairs intended by two such acts are identical: one can come to perceive the same things one thinks about. But the acts themselves are phenomenologically quite different. A great deal of our thinking is performed emptily, and much of it must be empty since any perceptual states or mental imagery would be massively inadequate to the intended objects. Any attempt, on our part at least, to intuitively illustrate the content of the thought that a mole contains $6.022 \times 10^{23}$ atoms is futile. For now, I will rest content with the claim that perceptual and other intuitive acts, including hallucinations, imaginings, dreams, and pictorial memories, have a distinctive sort of phenomenological character that mere thoughts, as such, do not possess. I will refer to this feature or set of features as their “intuitive character.”

In general, the intuitive character of an act can be varied independently of its conceptual content. Suppose, to borrow Husserl’s example, I see a blackbird flying through the garden. There is no conceptual content $C$ such that, in virtue of perceiving this blackbird in the determinate way in which I perceive it, I am entertaining $C$. On the basis of precisely this perceptual experience, I can entertain the contents “That is black!” or “That is a black bird!” or “There it soars!” or any other number of others. And I can think any one of those thoughts on the basis of experiences that differ from my present one. There is no perceptual experience $E$ such that, in virtue of thinking “That is a black bird,” I am undergoing $E$. My utterance, and the thought it expresses, does not change in either reference or sense when the bird flies by or I move two feet to the left. This is why you don’t need to have an experience exactly, or even approximately, like mine in order to understand precisely what I’ve said. It’s worth noting that these examples include demonstrative concepts, and Husserl fully intends these claims to apply to them as well. The demonstrative content expressed by the sentence “That is Dan” does not change in either reference or sense when he turns to the side or I move two feet to the right. But those experiences differ in intuitive content. As Husserl says, “a pointing reference remains the

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13 Hua XIX/2, 550/680.
same, whichever out of a multitude of mutually belonging percepts may underlie it, in all of which the same, and recognizably the same, object appears.”¹⁴ Accordingly, “our reference to ‘this’ is fulfilled in perception, but is not perception itself.”¹⁵

What is phenomenologically distinctive about conceptual content, I think, is that for almost any conceptual content $C$, there is no intuitive character $I$ such that being in a mental state with $C$ entails or is entailed by being in a state with intuitive character $I$. In Elisabeth Camp’s terminology, conceptual content is “stimulus-independent.”¹⁶ There are some counterexamples, however. Consider, for instance, the conditions for understanding the content “This sensation feels *this way*.” Arguably one could not entertain such a content if one were not experiencing the sensation in question in precisely the way in question. But in this case, the distinction between the conceptual content and the sensation is obvious. Experiencing a sensation is surely not identical with entertaining such a content. The reason this conceptual content entails undergoing a distinctive sort of experience is grounded in the peculiar mode of givenness of sensations, namely that they cannot be presented in the flesh via many different modes of presentation. Any change in the way a sensation feels is a change in the sensation itself. Even though the proposition is *sufficient* for undergoing a particular sort of experience, the experience doesn’t have its intuitive character *in virtue of* the proposition’s content, but vise versa.

Husserl, for what it’s worth, appears to have something very much like this in mind. After drawing a tight connection between “conceptualizing thought” and “the formation of generalities taking place in it,”¹⁷ he writes: “Only general thought leads to determinations which create a store of cognitions available beyond the situation and intersubjectively.”¹⁸ And again, “It is only the act of apprehension in the form of generality which makes possible that detachment from the here and now of the experiential situation, implicit in

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¹⁴ Hua XIX/2, 554/684.
¹⁵ Hua XIX/2, 555/685.
¹⁸ EU 384/319.
the concept of the objectivity of thought.”¹⁹ Although it would appear, from these remarks, that only general contents are conceptual, this is only because Husserl has a very unorthodox conception of generality. According to Husserl, even the contents expressed by proper names are general, a generality that consists not, as in the case of common nouns, in the fact that their extensions include numerous objects, but in the fact that each of their meanings covers “an ideally delimited manifold of possible intuitions, each of which could serve as the basis for an act of recognitive naming endowed with the same sense.”²⁰ And that is precisely to say that the meaning of a proper name is such that it can be the content of acts that differ from one another in their intuitive character. He makes the same point, as we’ve already seen, about demonstrative contents.

This account also explains why conceptual contents are fit to serve as the meanings of linguistically communicable contents. Conceptual contents—most, at least—are objective in the sense that entertaining them does not require one to adopt any particular point of view. They are, therefore, fit to serve as the contents of different minds whose owners occupy potentially radically different points of view in a way that determinate perceptual contents, which are necessarily perspectival, are not. The existence of contents of that sort is, quite plausibly, a condition for the possibility of linguistic communication.

§ 3. The Problem of Nonconceptual Content
In light of this, we can pose the problem of nonconceptual content as follows: is there any type of intentional content that does not exhibit the sort of independence from an act’s intuitive character that either fully conceptual or demonstrative contents possess? Note that this question leaves out of consideration one type of nonconceptual content, namely hyletic data or qualia. If they exist—I’m not at all confident that they do—they are not both nonconceptual and intentional. But it is the nonconceptual and intentional sorts of contents that I am principally interested in and around which the contemporary debate has in large measure revolved.

One could attempt to explain the intuitive character of experience in terms of such

¹⁹ EU 384/319.
²⁰ Hua XIX/2, 563/692.
nonintentional components. Husserl himself seems, at times, to endorse such a view. He often speaks as though perceptual states and mere thoughts share the same intentional content or matter, and differ insofar as perceptual states have a third, non-intentional component of fullness, which he characterizes as “a characteristic moment of presentations alongside of quality and matter, a positive constituent only in the case of intuitive presentations, a privation in the case of signitive.”\(^\text{21}\) If the fullness, rather than the intentional essence, of an act is responsible for the difference between intuitive and signitive presentations, then perceptual acts and mere thoughts can have precisely the same intentional content. Thus Husserl writes, “However the fullness of a presentation may vary within its possible gradients of fulfilment, its intentional object, intended as it is intended, remains the same: its ‘matter’, in other words, stays the same.”\(^\text{22}\) Elsewhere, however, he seems to hold that perceptual intentionality is \textit{sui generis}: “Perception has its own intentionality that as yet does not harbor anything of the active comportment of the ego and of its constitutive accomplishment. For the intentionality of perception is rather presupposed in order for the ego to have something for which or against which it can decide.”\(^\text{23}\) This is also a natural conclusion to draw from his arguments that conceptual contents or meanings and perceptual acts can be varied independently of one another.

It seems clear to me that the intuited aspects of a perceived object are intuited precisely because of a distinctive type of \textit{essentially intuitive content}, and not because some intentional content that may just as well be empty is wedded, in some way, to a non-}

\(^{21}\) \textit{Hua} XIX/2, 607-8/729.
\(^{22}\) \textit{Hua} XIX/2, 618/738. Several commentators interpret him as holding the same view. Dallas Willard \cite[Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984), 152, my emphasis] {Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge} remarks that in fulfillment, “The act (or meaningful word), \textit{through the identity of its meaning with that of the corresponding intuition}, actually attaches itself to the meant.” Klaus Rosen \cite[Evidenz in Husserls deskriptiver Transzendentalphilosophie (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1977), 27], also speaking of fulfillment, writes: “Signitive und intuitive Akte können in der Weise einander zugeordnet sein, dass sie identische Materien haben.” Rudolph Bernet \cite[“Desiring to Know Through Intuition,” Husserl Studies 19 (2003), 153-166, here 155] {Desiring to Know Through Intuition} writes: “The synthetic act which unifies these two elementary acts benefits from the fact that the (at least partial) identity of their intentional ‘matter’ goes hand in hand with a difference as to their intuitive fullness.”
intentional quale or hyletic datum. I think there are many reasons for thinking so, but one of the most important is that conceptualism cannot account for the distinctive role of perception in the production of knowledge. This is somewhat surprising, since the idea that only conceptual contents can be epistemically relevant is one of the more popular arguments for conceptualism. Only mental states with propositional content can stand in logical relations with other states, the argument goes, and only logical relations can be reason-giving. So if perception justifies beliefs—and it does—it must have conceptual content.

This argument does, I think, rest on a real insight, which is that only states with intentional content, and, specifically, a kind of intentional content that represents how things are, can be reason-giving. This rules out raw feels and mere sensations. The mistake is to suppose that only conceptual contents can represent how things are. This mistake is especially clear in some of McDowell’s work. McDowell suggests that the alternative to his conceptualist view is that the justification of an experiential belief must terminate in “pointing to a bare presence.” That is, the alternative to conceptualism must be the Myth of the Given, which presents us with the following picture of epistemic justification:

once we have exhausted all the available moves within the space of concepts, all the available moves from one conceptually organized item to another, there is still one more step we can take: namely, pointing to something that is simply received in experience. It can only be pointing, because ex hypothesi this last move in a justification comes after we have exhausted the possibilities of tracing grounds from one conceptually organized, and so articulable, item to another.

And that will not do.

This argument critically depends on the claim that the objects of nonconceptual states of consciousness must be bare presences, raw givens, or something equally remote

24 Shim (“Nonconceptual Content”) argues convincingly that the difference between perception and mere thought is not one of thetic quality either. See also Hua XI, 36/74-5.
26 MW, 39.
27 MW, 6.
from what we actually experience. After all, “pointing to something that is simply received in experience,” provided that something is an ordinary object or state of affairs, is a perfectly legitimate way of justifying a belief. If I ask you why you believe that it’s raining, the justification of your belief would terminate, in any context that is even approximately normal, by your pointing to the rain. Justifying a belief by directing someone’s perception and attention to the very chunk of the world that it is about is typically a conversation stopper. It is the act of pointing to a bare presence, not the act of pointing as such, which we must regard as epistemically useless.

Why should we think that the objects of nonconceptual mental states must be bare presences? I suspect that McDowell may think so because he confuses objects and contents of awareness: “That things are thus and so is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement … So it is conceptual content. But that things are thus and so is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of that layout of the world: it is how things are.”28 But the phrase “that things are thus and so” is ambiguous between propositions and states of affairs. The proposition that snow is white, for instance, is not the same thing as the state of affairs that snow is white. The first consists of concepts and is about snow’s being white. The latter is what that proposition is about. Furthermore, the state of affairs cannot be the content of an experience; it can be the object of an experience. And the proposition cannot be “how things are.” It represents how things are. Once we distinguish the proposition (P) that things are thus and so from the state of affairs (S) it represents—the truth-bearer from the truth-maker—we cannot conclude from the fact that an experience has S as its object that it has P as its content, since S might also be the object of a different kind of content P*. Different sorts of contents might have the same objects. Even bare presences can be objects of conceptual contents, as McDowell’s own discussion proves. I suspect that anything whatsoever can be conceptualized.

As I’ve argued more extensively elsewhere,29 the case for nonconceptual content is aided considerably by the fact that in order to explain the difference between merely thinking about something and perceiving it, we need to appeal to something that is both

28 MW, 26.
epistemically relevant and unique to perception. I can merely think that my desk is messy. I can also perceive my messy desk. If the conditions are right, I will think that my desk is messy while I perceive that it is messy, and that will typically result in my knowing, or at least having a very good justification for believing, that my desk is messy. I will find my desk to be just the way I think it to be. Because merely thinking that my desk is messy doesn’t result in being justified in believing that it is, and neither does thinking it twice, there must be something that the experience possesses that the mere thought lacks, and this feature, far from being a mere sensation that attaches to a propositional content the experience shares with the belief—the sort of thing a conceptualist would, I think rightly, regard as epistemically epiphenomenal anyway—is what distinguishes experience epistemically.

Even resorting to demonstratives isn’t sufficient to explain the epistemic contribution of experience, since two mental states might have the same demonstrative content and still differ epistemically. I can think “that is a messy desk” if I perceive the messy desk from afar in dim light, or if I perceive it from up close under favorable light. The thought receives more support in the second case than the first, despite the identity of demonstrative contents. What accounts for the fact that perceptual experiences are so phenomenologically distinctive and play such a preeminent role in knowledge is something that sets them apart from beliefs, not some feature they share with them.

That perceptual experiences have a different sort of content from beliefs is further supported by the fact that the reason-giving relation between perceptual experiences and beliefs is fundamentally different from the reason-giving relations that hold among beliefs. Finding my desk to be as I think it to be is fulfillment—or, more precisely, epistemic fulfillment. In epistemic fulfillment, I “experience how the same objective item which was ‘merely thought of’ in symbol is now presented in intuition, and that it is intuited as being precisely the determinate so-and-so that it was at first merely thought or meant to be.”30 This way of justifying a belief is very different from justifying it inferentially. First, if my belief B is supported by other beliefs B*, B**, etc., and if B is justified, then those beliefs must themselves be justified. If, however, B is justified in virtue of being fulfilled by a

30 Hua XIX/2, 566/694.
perceptual experience, the perceptual experience is not itself warranted. Perceptual experiences aren’t the kinds of things that could be justified or unjustified.\textsuperscript{31} Good eyesight is not a sign of intelligence, and hallucinating is not a form of irrationality. Second, the constituent acts in fulfillment must have the same objects. If a belief B is epistemically supported on the basis of B*, B**, etc., however, it is rarely the case that any of those supporting beliefs have the same object as the belief they support, and never the case that all of them do. Third, fulfillment is not reasoning. In reasoning, I come to believe that the world is a certain way by thinking of the other ways I take it to be; reasoning is a matter of determining what is the case given that something else is the case. In fulfillment, I come to believe that the world is a certain way because I find it to be just that way—not, it’s worth emphasizing, because I believe the proposition that I’ve found it to be that way, but because that proposition is true.

One might argue that the conceptualist can explain the role of experience in knowledge, since fulfillment itself is a distinctive kind of act with its own sort of intentional object. In fulfillment, I am not just conscious of my messy desk. I am also aware that the desk is present as I think it to be. The desk is not merely given, and not only meant, and not only given and meant—as happens when one is wondering about the whereabouts of one’s glasses while staring right at them. Rather, it is \textit{given as it is meant}. I take this to be part of Michael Barber’s point in response to my objection to McDowell. According to Barber, in fulfillment “a new level and kind of content accrues to the object perceptually experienced, which is now experienced as ‘fulfilling’ (or not) a formerly empty signitive intending.”\textsuperscript{32} This is not, he argues, any sort of bare presence to which McDowell objects, since “the content ‘fulfilling’ only appears only after conceptualized contents of experience have been brought into relationship with one another.”\textsuperscript{33} This means that “the meaning-content of ‘fulfilling’ belongs to a conceptual network ... and hence ‘fulfilling’ is in no way a bare presence independent of any conceptual relations.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Barber, “Holism and Horizon,” 83-4.
\textsuperscript{33} Barber, “Holism and Horizon,” 84.
\textsuperscript{34} Barber, “Holism and Horizon,” 84.
Of course I have no interest in defending bare presences or any alleged perceptual awareness of them, or any experiences which are incapable of bearing epistemic relations to conceptual contents. And I agree with Barber’s claim that fulfillment differs from mere perception. The main problem with this response, however, is that no account of perception or fulfillment which attempts to explain them in terms of their objects will suffice, since, again, any object whatsoever can be merely thought about. Fulfillment isn’t just a matter of being conscious that an object is given as it is meant. It is a matter of being intuitively conscious of that. In fulfillment, the correspondence between perceived object and meant object is itself given rather than emptily represented. I can merely think, right now, that I am having an experience that fulfills my thought that Moscow is cold. And I can merely think that the object of my present experience fulfills that thought. But it doesn’t, nor am I intuitively conscious of its doing so. So merely predicating ‘fulfilling’ of either an object or an experience does not amount to having an experience of fulfillment, since one can think that of any experience or object whatsoever—including the experiences of others, which could never fulfill any of one’s own thoughts. The problem of distinguishing intuition and thought has just reappeared at the level of fulfillment itself. And conceptualizing the relation of fulfillment does not seem to be necessary for fulfillment to occur either. When a perceptual experience fulfills a thought, we are hardly ever in the business of applying the concept ‘fulfilling’ to that experience or ‘fulfilled’ to the thought. When one reads Husserl’s Sixth Logical Investigation, one learns to apply the concept of fulfillment to a kind of experience which one already had prior to and independently of reading Husserl.

Finally, appealing to the distinction between “receptivity” and “spontaneity” will not help either. According to Barber, who fully acknowledges that McDowell does not elaborate on the distinction with sufficient care, McDowell might account for the difference between perception and mere thought by claiming that “perception involves conceptually shaped experiences … that resist our ability to manipulate them away and that mere thoughts about an empirical object would lack.”35 I’m not so sure our empirical thoughts are susceptible to that kind of manipulation. Try, for instance, to convince yourself that the stars are little holes poked in the firmament. More importantly, this poses a dilemma for

35 Barber, “Holism and Horizon,” 85.
McDowell. What accounts for the phenomenological and epistemic properties of perception is either the fact that it is passive, or it is (also) one’s awareness that it is passive. If the former claim is right, then some feature of experience besides its conceptual content is epistemically relevant. But if a feature like that can be epistemically relevant, why couldn’t nonconceptual content? And if one must be aware that the experience is passive, then we face our original problem all over again. I can just think that any mental act whatsoever is passive, or I can be intuitively aware of its being passive, and that difference makes a massive epistemic difference.

That perception has nonconceptual content is also supported by more straightforward considerations. It’s true that most attentive perception is more than just perception; it occurs within the context of epistemic fulfillment. And that means that most of the focal objects of perception are conceptualized. But perception is not fulfillment, and, unlike fulfillment, does not essentially involve concepts. Most perceptual experiences present us with far more than we think about. They would fulfill a wide variety of thoughts, if we entertained them, but they don’t actually fulfill those thoughts unless we actually do. An infant can have a stinging pain in its leg, but cannot fulfill the thought “I have a stinging pain in my leg.” I might hear every note in Chopin’s Black Key Etude without having thoughts about each note fulfilled—and just try to do that! Better yet, try to fulfill thoughts not only about each note, but each perceived chord, transition, phrase, volume, timbre, and so on. I might see 56 books on a shelf without having the thought “There are 56 books on the shelf” fulfilled. Even on my own terms, there is some number of books that I see, and I don’t know what it is. If asked “How many books do you see?”—which differs entirely from the question “How many books are on the shelf?”—I will sincerely and correctly answer “I don’t know.” I might see a certain color and only fulfill the thought that it is red. But my experience already has the right stuff to fulfill the thought that it is alizarin, and when I do acquire the concept ‘alizarin’, I will do so in consultation with the very thing that I already see.

Moreover, even in the context of fulfillment, perceiving something very often explains why one thinks about it. If I come home to find my basement flooded, the proposition “My basement is flooded” occurs to me because I am presented with my flooded basement. I don’t perceive the basement because I am entertaining that
proposition, nor do I first need to think that proposition in order for perception to take place. Indeed, perception often explains our ability to think about objects in the first place. It is not as though we are, *ab initio*, stocked with thoughts that we can then go attempt to verify experientially. Rather, perception explains the ability to think certain thoughts at all. As John Campbell puts it, “We are not to take the intentional character of experience as a given; rather, experience of objects has to be what explains our ability to think about those objects.”

Although this is by no means the final word on conceptualism, I am convinced that intuitive contents are one type of nonconceptual content. The same conclusion has been drawn by Michael Shim, who argues that what Husserl calls an act’s “fulfilling sense” is nonconceptual. I think this is right, both when such a content is functioning as a fulfilling sense and when it is not. However, my account differs significantly from Shim’s. First, on my view, intuitive contents are noetic, not noematic, at least as Shim understands ‘noematic’. According to Shim, noemata are objects of perception. Indeed, he maintains that “perceptual noemata are all we ever perceive.” This has the unfortunate consequence that either cats, trees, and other people are perceptual noemata, or that no one has ever perceived a cat, a tree, or another person. Setting that worry aside, contents on my view are bearers, rather than objects, of intentionality. Colors and cats aren’t conceptual contents, and they’re not nonconceptual contents, because they are not contents.

It seems to me that in characterizing perceptual noemata as “nonconceptual

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37 For a more thorough treatment of some of these and other arguments, see my “Conceptualism and the Myth of the Given” and *Perception and Knowledge: A Phenomenological Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), especially chapters 2-4. Moreover, establishing that experiences do not have conceptual content does not establish that they have nonconceptual content, since they might have no content at all. Experiences might, that is, be nothing more than a sheer, content-free awareness of an object. That is the view of most sense-data theorists, who individuate perceptual acts on the basis of their (immediate) objects, not contents. Bertrand Russell extends such a view to all mental acts: “At first sight it seems obvious that my mind is in different ‘states’ when I am thinking of one thing and when I am thinking of another. But in fact the difference of object supplies all the difference required” [*Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, ed. E. R. Eames in collaboration with K. Blackwell (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 43]. I present several considerations against such a view in *Perception and Knowledge*, chapter 6. For present defenses of the view, see Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness*, chapter 6, M.G.F. Martin, “The Reality of Appearances,” in A. Byrne and H. Logue, eds., *Disjunctivism: Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 91-116, and Bill Brewer, “How to Account for Illusion,” in A. Haddock and F. Macpherson, eds., *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 168-180.

38 Shim, “Conceptual Content,” 214.
contents,” Shim means that they are unconceptualized objects. But as we’ve seen, that cannot be an intrinsic property of them. They can be conceptualized as well. Furthermore, it leaves open the question: if we can be conscious of perceptual noemata (or anything else) without conceptualizing them, what accounts for that? That is, since it is not a feature of the object, what features or parts of the act (or West Coast noema qua mediator rather than object of intentionality) are responsible for that? The answer, it would seem, is nonconceptual contents of some sort. Those, rather than unconceptualized objects, are the proper objects of phenomenological interest in this case.

§ 4. Horizons

Intuitive contents are the most obvious candidates for nonconceptual contents. But they are not the only kind. The horizons which are partially constitutive of perception are another. And in some ways the case for nonconceptual content is even stronger here, since, thanks to the fact that many horizontal contents are empty rather than intuitive, there is no temptation to confuse them with hyletic or sensuous data.

One of Husserl’s greatest contribution to our understanding of perception is his insight that no perceptual experience consists solely of intuitive or self-giving content; rather, each experience necessarily harbors empty intentions towards unseen or undetermined parts and aspects of the object perceived. I see the cup. But in seeing the cup, I don’t see every part and piece of the cup. Nor do I see everything there is to see about the parts that are intuitively present. I can determine the color, or the features of its facing surface, more closely. Perception contains a surplus of empty content, and, since objects such as cups cannot possibly be adequately given, having such empty content is a necessary condition for perceiving those sorts of objects. The failure to recognize the empty content in perception might be called the myth of the adequately given—a myth to which many philosophical theories of perception have succumbed.

What Husserl thought he had found in the Investigations is that perceptual acts are composed of intuitive and signitive intentions. The empty contents present in perception are concepts or meanings. The story appears rather different after the development of his
theory of horizons, however.\textsuperscript{39} Exactly what Husserl means by ‘horizons’ is not always clear, and it’s beyond the task of this paper to work that question out. We should, however, distinguish all of the following relata of a perceptual act:

a) The unperceived and further-determinable sides, parts, and properties of a perceived object.

b) The totality of possible experiences in which those sides, parts, and properties would be perceptually exhibited.

c) The actual empty or partly empty intentions by whose means at least some of the entities in (a) and (b) are intended or indicated.

By the “horizons” of an experience, I mean to exclude both (a) and (b), with the understanding that both do bear very interesting relations to horizons. Horizons, as I will understand them, are features of acts, not objects. Furthermore, the horizon of an act is not a set of possible filled intentions, but a living body of actual empty ones. The table I currently see looks, right now, as though it has more to it than I see. And it does so in virtue of some actual features of the actual act I am carrying out right now, and not (just) in virtue of bearing (possible) relations to a set of possibilia. The horizon is a “horizon of reference to potentialities of consciousness”\textsuperscript{40}—without itself being those potentialities.

The horizon of an act, on at least one of Husserl’s understandings of ‘horizon’, namely the inner or internal horizon, consists of those intentional contents that point beyond what is intuitively given in an experience and prescribe which other perceptions are compatible with or would count as perceptions of the same thing as what is perceived now. “The ‘horizons’ of perceptions are another name for empty intentions … that are integrally cohesive and that are actualized in the progression of perception in and through different orientations.”\textsuperscript{41} In order, for instance, for my current perception to count as a presentation of a table, it must be partial and experienced as such. My current perception must have a horizon of empty intentions that point to unseen parts and properties of the

\textsuperscript{39} See Donn Welton, The Origins of Meaning (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), chapters 6-8, for what is perhaps the most comprehensive account of the development of Husserl’s thought on these and related issues.


\textsuperscript{41} Hua XI, 99/144.
table and prescribe, with varying degrees of determinacy, what the table would look like if I were to perceive it from different angles or under different conditions.

Horizontal contents can vary massively in how determinately they prescribe the non-intuited properties and parts of an object and, correspondingly, the experiences in which they would be perceptually given. The more determinately the horizon specifies the object, the more possibilities there are for frustration and surprise. If I see a mound of snow and anticipate very little concerning its composition, my experience leaves open many more possibilities than if I anticipate that it consists entirely of soft, powdery snow. In the latter case, there are a lot more ways in which my anticipation can be frustrated: I might kick it and discover that it is coated in a hard layer of ice, or that it is really a thin veneer of snow encasing a fire hydrant. These experiences will not surprise me if all my present experience specifies of the snow mound is that there is more to it, but if I anticipate that it is a soft pile of snow, they will.

What I have said above pertains, above all, to an act's internal horizon, which points towards further parts and determinations of the thematic object of perception and, correlatively, the experiences in which they would be perceived. But every perceptual act also has its external horizon. The table before me is, and is perceived as, an object in a surrounding environment. Apart from the fact that it belongs with the objects co-given with it—a felt belongingness that can, plausibly, be chalked up to a rich background of previously acquired knowledge—it has the more basic feature of appearing alongside and in the midst of other appearing things. There is a floor that supports it, and a window above it, and a lamp on top of it. These objects are there for me even when I don't attend to them. And the surrounding environment itself is both intuited and emptily intended. The door at end of my kitchen opens into another room, which is emptily intended but also present as a possible object of immediate perception. So is the space behind my head. The world does not end there. The field of possible further perceptual experiences is unlimited, and at least some of this sense of the limitlessness of the world is provided by the external horizon. The external horizon provides, then, not (just) an objective context in which perception uncontroversially takes place, but a consciousness of the context in which it takes place.

Husserl's doctrine of horizons is manifestly a development of his *Investigations* doctrine that every perceptual experience contains both signitive and intuitive
components. But the horizon is not—this is my view, at least—a body of meanings or concepts. Horizontal contents do not provide a framework of conceptual content in which intrinsically dumb, atomic sensations can be inserted as a kind of filling. Rather, intuitive contents themselves depend, in some way, for their very whatness on being united with their horizons. If, for instance, one learns of what appears to be a barn that it is a barn façade, it appears differently.\footnote{Sean Kelly provides a similar example, contrasting the same objects when they are perceived as buildings in an Old West town (saloons, banks) and when they are perceived as fixtures on a movie set. See his “The Non-conceptual Content of Perceptual Experience: Situation Dependence and Fineness of Grain,” \textit{Philosophy and Phenomenological Research} 62 (2001), 601-608, §1.} Note that I am using ‘appears’ in a phenomenal rather than, or in addition to, an epistemic sense. It doesn’t just intellectually \textit{seem to be different}, as it would, for instance, if someone were to correct our beliefs about its age or microphysical structure. It also \textit{appears differently}. Husserl expresses the dependence of intuitive contents on horizons clearly:

\begin{quote}
It is clear that a non-intuitive pointing beyond or indicating is what characterizes the side actually seen as a mere side, and what provides for the fact that the side is not taken for the thing, but rather, that something transcending the side is intended in consciousness as perceived, by which precisely that is actually seen.\footnote{\textit{Hua XI}, 6/43. See also \textit{Hua XVI}, §16, and Husserl, \textit{Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie}, Hua III, ed. K. Schuhman (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976); English translation: \textit{Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology}, trans. F. Kersten, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), §138.}
\end{quote}

The strictly intuitive contents of perception “are nothing for themselves; they are appearances—of only through the intentional horizons that are inseparable from them.”\footnote{\textit{Hua XI}, 4/41.} Here Husserl is adumbrating a view that is much closer to, say, Aron Gurwitch’s theory of Gestalt-contextures than the view, discussed at length in the \textit{Investigations} and making its appearance throughout even his late works, that perception is a matter of intrinsically non-intentional sensations undergoing “interpretation” or “apperception.”

On the other hand, the horizons are not autonomous either. They are not intentional contents which, in their indifference to variations in the intuitive character of consciousness, descend to the body, from time to time, to bestow the gift of meaning on its
pangs, twinges, and raw feels. Rather, horizontal contents are what they are in virtue of being united, in very determinate ways, with intentional intuitive contents. The contents in virtue of which I am conscious of the unseen backside of the chair did not “interpret” the “sensations” in virtue of which I intuit the front, since they could not exist at all if I were not presented with the front of the chair, and in the precise way that I am.

Furthermore, horizons themselves change with changes in the intuitive content of an act. Horizontal contents are “constantly in motion; with every new step of intuitive apprehension, new delineations of the object result, more precise determinations and corrections of what was anticipated.” As I walk around a barn, previously perceived portions fall away into emptiness, while previously empty intentions become perceptually fulfilled. With each change in the properly intuitive contents in an act of perception, there is a change in the intentional horizon as well. What was previously intuited falls away into horizontal emptiness, and what was emptily anticipated comes to proper perception. Horizons, then, are radically situation-dependent, so much so that any two experiences with different intuitive contents must have different horizontal contents. But concepts are not individuated that finely. When I walk around a barn and simultaneously think that it is a barn, my thought that it is a barn does not change as I walk around it. The concept ‘barn’ retains an identical sense across a multiplicity of experiences with different intuitive and horizontal contents. So, for that matter, does the demonstrative ‘that’, provided it actually refers to a barn rather than, say, a barn-adumbration.

Michael Barber also suggests that horizons are a kind of nonconceptual content, though it seems that what he means is that the objects of horizontal contents are not conceptualized. The focal objects of perception, such as the barking of a dog, always occur against a background of which we are marginally aware but not actively conceptualizing. For instance, you don’t conceptualize the white space behind and in the midst of these letters and words as you read, but without some sort of background against which these

45 EU, 137/122. Also see Hua I, 82/44: “Every subjective process has a process ‘horizon,’ which changes with the alteration of the nexus of consciousness to which the process belongs and with the process itself from phase to phase of its flow—an intentional horizon of reference to potentialities of consciousness that belong to the process itself.”
words can stand out, these words would not appear. But if we can be conscious of something without conceptualizing it, then we do so by means of contents which are not conceptual (in my sense of the terms in question).

It should also be clear that horizontal contents are nonconceptual on my own understanding of conceptual content, since they are not the kinds of contents that can be freely varied with the intuitive content of an act. Similar points have been made by several philosophers, though apparently independently of one another. Adolf Reinach expressly distinguished between the empty contents involved in perception and meanings.\(^\text{46}\) When I see a book, he points out, the whole book is presented, but only some of it is intuited. But we should not say that the non-intuited parts of the book are *meant* or conceived of. Rather, the non-intuitional contents of perception are intimately bound up with an act of presentation, an act in which the book itself is perceptually present. We can see their difference, he argues, when we perform a judgment of the form ‘The rear side of the object is...’ Here, says Reinach, we can readily grasp the difference between the enduring non-intuitional or horizontal content that is bound up with the perceptual experience and the “linguistically clothed, temporally punctual, self-contained” act of judging itself.\(^\text{47}\) The latter is not enduring and is not bound up with any particular perceptual experience. We can extend this observation by noting that such a judgment can be performed even when (a) the rear side comes into view and is therefore intuited and (b) the object is not perceptually present at all. Here the horizontal content varies or disappears entirely while the judgment remains constant. But if horizontal contents can vary independently of any conceptual contents, then they cannot be identical with any conceptual contents.

More recently, Daniel Dahlstrom has argued that horizontal contents are not conceptual, since, first, the horizon is something that is “interwoven” with and “pervades” an act of perceiving and, more importantly, because “there is a new horizon for every appearing-of-a-thing at every phase of perception.”\(^\text{48}\) And even more recently, Jeff Yoshimi


\(^{47}\) Reinach, “Negative Judgment,” 327.

has given several reasons for rejecting any assimilation of horizontal contents to conceptual ones, most notably that horizons do not have a linguistic, propositional structure, are not discrete units of information, cannot be modeled algorithmically, constitutively depend on the fine-grained details of a perceiver’s embodied condition, and, most importantly for my purposes, alter with changes in one’s experience. An experience’s horizon “is dynamic, changing on the basis of our ongoing experience.”

There’s one worry that needs to be addressed, however, and that is that fulfillment is a relation into which empty horizontal contents and intuitive contents can enter. After all, it’s just such a relationship the obtaining of which renders a sequence of perceptual acts harmonious. And since horizontal contents are empty contents whose objects can come to givenness in harmonious perceptual series, there is a perfectly legitimate sense in which they can be fulfilled (or frustrated). As a piece of music unfolds, anticipatory intentions find their fulfillment or frustration when later phases of the piece are intuited. The piece unfolds as I expected, or not as I expected. But if fulfillment is best regarded as a species of verification involving both intuitive and conceptual contents, then we must regard the horizontal contents as conceptual.

It’s true that fulfillment takes place in any harmonious series of perceptions. But it is not what I’ve called “epistemic fulfillment.” Rather, I think that this is a distinctive sort of fulfillment taking place at the level of perception itself. When a piece of music unfolds as I anticipate, it is not a matter of explicit, propositionally structured beliefs being verified on the basis of experience. It is not a matter of me comparing the world as it is given with the world as it is thought to be, as is the case in epistemic fulfillment. Epistemic fulfillment presupposes that perception reaches the relevant object on its own so that it can be there for thought to take hold of it as well. Rather, this is a process of fulfillment (or frustration) occurring at the level of perception itself. It is a process whereby empty contents belonging to the fabric of perception give way to intuitive contents that present the same objects. If that is right, then we have isolated a radically different category of fulfillment than any yet discussed: intuitive fulfillment.

I don’t think Husserl was ever especially clear on the distinction between these sorts of fulfillment, largely, I think, because he was never especially clear on the question of whether perception has nonconceptual content or not. But he does distinguish between Bewährheitung (confirmation) and Bewährung (verification), which correspond to syntheses of fulfillment occurring at the passive and the active levels, respectively. But the distinction between perception and thought is not the distinction between the two “levels” of passive and active synthesis. If we think of the (second, founded) level of activity as one where “we voluntarily direct our attention in interacting with objects,” then perception is certainly often active. Husserl, for instance, writes, “a consciousness of the object is actually and genuinely carried out only first in egoic acts; an object—an object as object—is only first there for the active ego.” But objects as objects are there for us constantly in perception and the distinctive sorts of syntheses that unfold therein. This is not to dispute the existence of the two levels, active and passive, to which Husserl and Yoshimi draw our attention. Those two levels do not, however, match up in any neat way with the levels in which I am interested.

Perception is always passive to some degree, but is also typically active, and often to a high degree. And while attentional modifications and various other forms of activity can transform a perceptual process, it always transforms it into another kind of perceptual process. Attention on the part of the ego or subject, whatever else it does, does not transform a perceptual experience into a thought—even if attending to something also gives rise to various thoughts—and does not transform intuitive fulfillment, which belongs essentially to perception as such, into epistemic fulfillment. The perception of the unfolding of a piece of music, including the fulfillment of anticipatory intentions, remains a perceptual process through and through, even when all of my attentional resources are bent towards the music. And the intuitive fulfillments I experience are totally different from epistemic fulfillment. The fulfillment of my thought that the piece will end with a crescendo is not the fulfillment of the predelineated consciousness of the crescendo that

50 Hua XI, Division 2, throughout. See translator’s remarks in Passive and Active Synthesis, 107, n. 62.
is part of the perceptual act itself, the one that I anticipate with a felt tension running throughout my entire body. Again, when I lose an edge while skiing, I anticipate my upcoming pain viscerally, not intellectually. I don’t judge that I’m about to hurt; in some odd way, I emptily perceive my imminent pain. Furthermore, a great deal of epistemic fulfillment is passive, in at least one recognizable sense. When I come home to find my basement flooded, I believe that it’s flooded without the slightest effort. And that belief resists any subsequent efforts to dislodge it.

The need for recognizing two levels of intentionality, and with it two distinct levels of fulfillment, becomes clearer when we realize that intuitive fulfillment and epistemic fulfillment have different temporal structures. In intuitive fulfillment, the empty horizontal intention must occur before its fulfilling intuition. Despite Husserl’s suggestion that in fulfillment, the signitive intention is either earlier than or contemporaneous with the fulfilling intuition, this is not the case in epistemic fulfillment. Which order the intuitive and conceptual acts occur in is irrelevant in epistemic fulfillment, provided that the appropriate synthesis between them takes place. We wouldn’t want to insist that someone doesn’t know, on the basis of perception, that his house is on fire simply because the temporal progression went from finding to thinking rather than from thinking to finding, especially when the former progression is the rule in empirical knowledge. When I hear the crescendo, I fulfill the thought that there is a crescendo at the same time that I hear the crescendo. In intuitive fulfillment, on the other hand, the fulfilling experience comes after the empty one. There is not an overlap of present empty horizontal contents and intuitive ones, since the very same part or moment cannot be simultaneously intended via an empty horizontal content and a presenting, intuitive one. Rather, there is an overlap between past, and presently retained, empty horizontal contents and present intuitive ones. The syntheses of intuitive fulfillment, then, have a different temporal structure than the syntheses of epistemic fulfillment.

53 Willard, Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge, 226 writes: “In general, fulfillment occurs only where there is a self-conscious realization of the enhancement of the degree to which what was (in some measure) merely thought of becomes intuitively present as it was thought to be.” Also see Daniel J. Dwyer, “Husserl’s Appropriation of the Psychological Concepts of Apperception and Attention,” Husserl Studies 23 (2007): 83-118, 92: “every filled intention fulfills what was previously only emptily meant, as it was emptily meant.”
§ 5. Conclusion

To sum up, then, I have presented what I take to be a phenomenologically promising characterization—though only an initial one—of the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual content, and have presented a couple considerations in favor of the latter's existence. There are many other interesting features of conceptual content that I have not explored. For instance, conceptual contents all belong to syntactical or logico-grammatical categories, and the most typical (and possibly only) complete conceptual contents, namely propositions, are susceptible to negation-transformation—in a way that perceptual content, as Reinach (1982: 352) argues, is not.54 Pursuing those issues is, however, beyond the scope of the present paper.