

McDowell and Perceptual Reasons

Anna Tomaszewska

ABSTRACT

John McDowell claims that perception provides reasons for empirical beliefs. Perceptual reasons, according to the author of *Mind and World*, can be identified with passively “taken in” facts. Concepts figure in the acts of acquiring perceptual reasons, even though the acts themselves do not consist in judgments. Thus, on my reading, McDowell’s account of the acquisition of reasons can be likened to Descartes’ account of the acquisition of ideas, rather than to Kant’s theory of judgment as an act by means of which one’s cognition comes to be endowed with objective validity. However, unlike Descartes, McDowell does not acknowledge the skeptical challenge which his conception of the acquisition of reasons might face. He contends that perception is factive without arguing for the background assumption (about a “perfect match” between mind and world) on which it rests. Hence, as I suggest in my article, the McDowellian claim that perception provides reasons for empirical beliefs is not sufficiently warranted.

In the debate between conceptualists and non-conceptualists about perceptual contents, one of the most frequently exploited arguments for conceptualism—a view on which the contents of perception are conceptual¹—has been formulated along the following lines: (A) Experience provides reasons for (empirical) beliefs. (B) Reasons are thinkable items, and so they

1. More specifically, two versions of the view have been distinguished: state and content conceptualism (the same distinction pertains to non-conceptualism, which is an opposite view). State conceptualism about perceptual experience says that in order to perceive the subject must be equipped with the right kind of concepts and perceiving consists in adopting a certain attitude to some propositional contents. Content conceptualism, in turn, says that what is endorsed in the acts of perceiving is conceptually structured. Timothy M. Crowther, “Two Conceptions of Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism,” *Erkenntnis* 65 (2006): 245–276.

are conceptual. (C) Therefore, experiential content must be conceptual.²

Some authors, for example Christopher Peacocke, argue against (B),³ but (A) can also be challenged in a variety of ways. After all, it is not self-evident, but rests at the very least on the assumption that, in normal epistemic conditions, perception constitutes a reliable source of knowledge. Thus, in normal epistemic conditions, if S sees that p, then S believes that p.⁴ But if S also believes that he is hallucinating or that an evil Cartesian demon deludes him, then there might be no such implication. Also, the kind of perception that the entailment deals with is what some authors, for example Fred Dretske, have characterized as perception of facts, which becomes contrasted with mere perception of objects (or “simple seeing”).⁵ Surely, it does not follow from the fact that perception of facts gives rise to empirical beliefs that all the representational content of perceptual experience is conceptual unless one takes it that all perception must be perception of facts (which would require some justification).

It seems that John McDowell endorses the argument for conceptualism as outlined above. According to the American philosopher, reasons that can be delivered by perceptual experience are conceptual, but do not

2. Bill Brewer, *Perception and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Philippe Chuard, “Perceptual Reasons” (ms), http://philrsss.anu.edu.au/people-defaults/philippe/perceptual_reasons.pdf.

3. According to Peacocke, the rationalizing function can also be attributed to the non-conceptual content of perceptual experience. Other functions performed by non-conceptual content include the following: (i) it makes conceptual content available to the subject of experience; (ii) it accounts for the acquisition of empirical, and specifically observational, concepts; (iii) it explains why both concept-possessors and more “primitive” entities, like human babies or non-human animals, can undergo content-laden perceptual experiences; (iv) it explains intentional action. Christopher Peacocke, “Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content,” *Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 5 (2001): 239–264.

4. This is called a criterion of weak cognitive significance. A complete list of the criteria that must be met if the content of experience is to be considered conceptual can be found in: York H. Gunther, “General Introduction,” in *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, ed. York H. Gunther (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 1–20. The criteria in question also include: compositionality, strong cognitive significance, reference determinacy, and force independence.

5. Dretske distinguishes between an epistemic and a non-epistemic kind of perception: the former results in a belief, the latter does not. See e.g. Fred Dretske, “Meaningful Perception,” in *An Invitation to Cognitive Science: Visual Cognition*, ed. Daniel N. Osherson, Stephen M. Kosslyn, and Lila R. Gleitman (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 331–352; Fred Dretske, “Simple Seeing,” in *Perception, Knowledge and Belief. Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97–112; Fred Dretske, “What We See. The Texture of Conscious Experience,” in *Perceiving the World*, ed. Bence Nanay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54–67.

amount to judgments. In Lecture II of *Mind and World*, he says: “In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment: it becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value.”⁶ In this paper, I argue that the account of perceptual reasons suggested by McDowell, when considered as a coherent theoretical proposal, fails to meet a skeptical objection. To say that the account fails to meet a skeptical objection is another way of stating a conviction that perceptual reasons, as McDowell conceives of them, are not good enough reasons to justify beliefs about the objects encountered in experience.

In order to lend support to my claim, I will draw a comparison between the Cartesian and the Kantian theories of judgment, and suggest that McDowell’s view, somewhat paradoxically, approximates the former one. The suggestion becomes more plausible once we cease to interpret Descartes’ views on perception in terms of the notorious “veil,”⁷ and instead do so in terms of a causal theory.⁸ As much as ideas are passively taken in by the Cartesian intellect, so are, for McDowell, the contents of perception, which furnish the input to perception-based judgments. But whereas Descartes, more or less convincingly, offers some criteria by means of which to distinguish truth-bearing ideas from illusions, McDowell does not clearly indicate what turns some perceptual reasons into good credentials for empirical beliefs. This is what, ultimately, renders perceptual knowledge unreliable and, as I see it, could be said to expose McDowell’s theory to the charge of failing to address skeptical concerns.

6. John H. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 26.

7. John Yolton has argued that Descartes’ theory of perception does not have to give rise to representational (indirect realist) theories of perception, and hence that the “veil of perception” objection, which has frequently been raised, cannot be very well grounded. The objection, according to Yolton, would result from Thomas Reid’s simplified reading of the kind of a theory of perception that one can find in Descartes and, subsequently, John Locke. Indeed, Descartes’ texts can motivate both interpretations—that is, the direct realist and the indirect realist one—since he distinguishes (e.g. in the foreword preceding the main text of the *Meditations*) two ways in which the word “idea” can be understood: either as referring to an act of the intellect, or as referring to the contents of this act. See John W. Yolton, *Perception and Reality: a History from Descartes to Kant* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

8. Such a reading has been suggested in David Macarthur, “McDowell, Scepticism, and the ‘Veil of Perception,’” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 2 (2003): 175–190.

1. REASONS, "OSCILLATION"⁹ AND CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

We normally use the word "reason" in the context of such statements as "my reason to take aspirin was that I had a cold" or "the reason why the lake froze was that the temperature dropped below 0°C." The reason mentioned in the first statement could be called a motive for action, whereas the reason mentioned in the second statement should rather be considered as a fact explaining another fact. Perceptual reasons, in turn, might be conceived along the lines of a statement such as this: "the reason I believe Tom shaved off his beard is that I have recently seen him." Of course, mere seeing does not suffice to establish a belief about a certain fact. For I could have seen Tom without noticing that he had shaved off his beard, i.e. without recognition of that fact.¹⁰ This recognition of a fact is, however, what involves a judgment—endorsing that things' being thus and so is the case. Thus, a perceptual reason consists in one's endorsement of a fact which one gets to know about by way of perceptual experience. Let us keep in mind this way of thinking about perceptual reasons while discussing McDowell's proposal.

According to McDowell, perceptual reasons cannot be characterized as *sui generis* judgments.¹¹ They must be capable of being thought, though; hence they must be conceptual. Because experience justifies our perceptual beliefs, and justification is a logical relation, the content of experience must be conceptual through and through. Otherwise we could, at best, count on the "exculpation" rather than justification of our beliefs—at least as the latter is construed according to the two opposing theories known, respectively, as coherentism and the "Myth of the Given."¹² Both sever our

9. Crispin Wright, "McDowell's Oscillation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, no. 2 (1998): 395–402.

10. Could my seeing him, nevertheless, furnish me with at least a very weak reason for my belief? Can I, without having noticed that Tom shaved off his beard, later on recollect seeing him without a beard and on the basis of my memory form the right kind of belief? M. G. Martin argues that it is possible. See Michael G. Martin, "Perception, Concepts and Memory," *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 4 (1992): 745–763.

11. Rather, he associates them with "appearings" and says that they "are just more of the same kind of things beliefs are: possessors of empirical content, bearing on the empirical world." McDowell, *Mind and World*, 142.

12. According to McDowell, the "Myth of the Given" motivates the embrace of coherentism but the latter ends up again in the Myth. In both cases, the idea is that experience remains in a causal but not a rational relation with our perceptual beliefs. Therefore, we are "exculpated" from but not justified in entertaining these beliefs. As McDowell puts it: "But it is one thing to be exempt from blame, on the ground that the position we find ourselves in can be traced ultimately to brute force; it is quite another thing to have a justification. In effect, the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications" (*ibid.*, 8).

rational connections with reality by either depriving our experiences of any rationalizing function, or failing to provide an intelligible explanation of the relation between experiences and beliefs. Consequently, we land up in skepticism, because we cannot see how empirical knowledge, and so access to our everyday world, is possible at all. The “Cartesian” chasm opens up between mind and world.

As a remedy to an “oscillation” between coherentism and the “Myth,” McDowell offers a conceptualist doctrine about the content of perceptual experience. Conceptualism is meant to secure both the rationality of the mind-world relation and the objectivity, or object-relatedness, of our beliefs.¹³ However, as some commentators have pointed out, the author of *Mind and World* does not make it clear what exactly he understands by perceptual or experiential reasons.¹⁴ All we know is that, on McDowell’s tenets, experiences, which provide reasons for empirical beliefs, are endowed with conceptual content, even though they do not involve judgments.¹⁵ Hence, the reasons one derives from experience cannot consist in the endorsement of facts. Furthermore, according to McDowell, experiences do not stand in what one may regard as inferential relations to our beliefs,¹⁶ though they justify them; they do not play the role of premises in syllogisms in which perceptual beliefs figure in conclusions. Finally, our having perceptual reasons at all is due to the fact that experience furnishes

13. “When we take receptivity itself to impinge rationally on belief, we equip ourselves to understand experience as openness to the world. . . . nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts” (ibid., 143). “In the picture I recommend . . . the world is not external to the space of concepts. . . . [W]e are to erase the boundary that symbolized a gulf between thought and the world. . . . [T]he world . . . is ultimate in the order of justification” (ibid., 146).

14. Charles Larmore, “Attending to Reasons,” in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 193–208.

15. According to Barry Stroud, McDowell characterizes perceptual reasons in such a way that they in the end turn out to amount to judgments. But if we want to avoid falling into the infinite regress, we should concede that ultimately these judgments must be grounded in non-conceptual impressions. As Stroud puts it: “But tracing the justification back only to what I have called the experience of seeing that it is raining would trace it back only to something that still involves judgment or belief about the independent world. To see that p is to judge that p. And for McDowell that judgment, like all empirical judgments, will be justified only if it is grounded in an experience which is an impression.” Barry Stroud, “Sense-experience and the grounding of thought,” in *Reading McDowell*, 84.

16. “But though the concept of inference is central for Brandom, it is not central for me . . . In the conceptual activity I am mainly concerned with, that of making observational judgments, what matters is the rationality exemplified in judging whether things are thus and so in the light of whether things are (observationally) thus and so.” John H. McDowell, “Reply to Commentators,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, no. 2 (1998): 405.

us with a kind of “openness to the layout of reality. Experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks.”¹⁷

It is to the last claim that I now want to turn my attention. In McDowell’s view, this “openness to reality” requires that experience be receptive, regardless of the “conceptual capacities” being inextricably intertwined with, or operating within, it. The receptivity of experiences precludes the involvement of judgment in them. Why should that be the case? A possible reply might point in the direction of the fact that a judgment could somehow modify the content of experience, and this would prevent us from being genuinely “open to reality.” But this does not seem to be true for, as McDowell claims, experiences and judgments, which are based on them, share the same *content*.¹⁸ A recoil from some kind of idealism might explain why experiences are characterized as passive; but it is far more difficult to see how a claim about their passivity can be reconciled with a claim that they have conceptual contents, or that they are conceptually structured. For the best candidates for conceptually structured items are thoughts. From what has been said thus far, it follows both that experiences would amount to taking in thoughts of a certain kind and that the conceptual capacities or understanding (to use a Kantian term) are receptively involved in perceptual experience. I hope to make it clear, in the forthcoming section, that such an account of the conceptual capacities corresponds fairly well with the account of the understanding found in Descartes.

2. DESCARTES AND KANT ON JUDGMENT AND UNDERSTANDING

A. *Descartes*

In the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in the Fourth Meditation, which aims mainly at an explanation of errors in human cognition, Descartes provides an account of judgment and the faculties of the mind that constitute it. The latter involve the understanding and the will.¹⁹ According

17. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 26.

18. “The content of the item in the light of which a judgment of this kind [i.e. an observational judgment] has its rational standing is the same as the content of the judgment itself.” McDowell, “Reply to Commentators,” 405.

19. “[W]hen I come to examine myself more closely and to consider what are my errors [i.e. false judgments] . . . , I find that they depend upon two joint causes, namely, the faculty of knowing which I possess and the faculty of choice, or rather of free will—that is to say, of my understanding together with my will. For by the understanding alone . . . I only

to Descartes, the understanding is receptive and its function consists in representing ideas, which might then be referred to objects. The ideas come from material objects, the mind itself, or God (in which case they are called innate ideas). The understanding does not produce judgments, though: this task is assigned to the will. But what exactly does the will do? Briefly, it can be answered that the will either accepts certain cognitions of the understanding (ideas) as true, or rejects them as false.²⁰ The clearer and more distinct these cognitions are, the more likely it is that the will accepts them. Clarity and distinctness is another name for intuitive certainty of cognition, which arises when there are no overriding reasons to reject a particular cognition.

For Descartes, intuitive certainty marks mathematical cognitions as well as the cognition of the existence of God and the subject; empirical cognitions do not partake in intuitive certainty. Thus, to make a judgment means to decide that a particular cognition can be endorsed, i.e. to acknowledge that any potential reasons to doubt can be overridden by positive evidence for the truth of a given cognition. Since truth comes down to correspondence between cognition and reality,²¹ an act of judgment results in referring a given idea to reality—and hence, if one may so put it, in bridging the gap between mind and world. In other words, by making a judgment, one refers one's ideas, on the basis of evidence collected by the understanding, to mind-independent, objective reality. The question remains, of course, whether this can really be performed, as in the end all we can be entirely certain of are only our ideas, understood either as acts of the intellect, or as the contents of these acts. Descartes' strategy of overcoming the kind of doubts spelled out above proved quite complex but, in the end, consisted in his granting—and this "granting" assumed the form of proof—that only the belief in the existence of a non-deceiving God

conceive the ideas of things which I may assert or deny." René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Lawrence J. Lafleur (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1951), 50 [64–5].

20. In Descartes' words: "it consists only in the fact that we can . . . do a given thing or not do it—that is to say, we can affirm or deny, pursue or avoid. Or more properly, our free will consists only in the fact that in affirming or denying, pursuing or avoiding the things suggested by the understanding, we behave in such a way that we do not feel that any external force has constrained us in our decision" (ibid., 51 [66–7]).

21. This is, of course, a slightly oversimplified rendering of Descartes' conception of truth. In some sense, all ideas are true to the extent that they are in the understanding, but in another sense only those ideas are true which adequately represent the objects that have caused them. Whereas ideas have "objective reality," their causes are said to "exist formally." See Descartes, *Meditations*, 37 [41–2].

could override all skeptical doubts: both those which were aimed at undermining our knowledge of the external world and those which questioned mathematical truths.²²

B. Kant

Although Kant distinguishes three higher faculties of the mind (namely reason, the faculty of judgment, and the understanding),²³ in the *Critique of Pure Reason* the understanding is presented as a spontaneous faculty of the mind, the activity of which expresses itself in combining representations, hence in judging.²⁴ A judgment whose construction is based on the pure concepts of the understanding (the so-called categories) possesses objective validity. In a judgment, (mediate) reference to the (intersubjectively accessible) object of cognition becomes established.²⁵ Thus, a judgment does not require that two different realms be compared: the subjective and the objective. To have an empirical cognition of an object means, for Kant, to make a judgment about this object, i.e. to make some aspect of the object manifest in cognition. But, as some commentators, such as Richard Aquila, have pointed out, reference to objects by means of judgments presupposes a kind of pre-conceptual representation of objects.²⁶ Therefore, one may argue, experience does not necessarily involve judgment, on the Kantian tenets. However, it could be replied,

22. For the significance of theology for Descartes' epistemological enterprise, see Zbigniew Janowski, *Cartesian Theodicy—Descartes' Quest for Certitude* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002).

23. "General logic," Kant writes in the first *Critique*, "is constructed on a plan that corresponds quite precisely with the division of the higher faculties of cognition. These are: understanding, the power of judgment, and reason." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 267 [A130/B169].

24. "[T]he faculty for bringing forth representations itself, or the spontaneity of cognition, is the understanding" (ibid., 193 [A51/B75]). And further: "We can, however, trace all actions of the understanding back to judgments, so that the understanding in general can be represented as a faculty for judging" (ibid., 205 [A69/B94]).

25. "All judgments are accordingly functions of unity among our representations, since instead of an immediate representation a higher one, which comprehends this and other representations under itself, is used for the *cognition of the object*, and many possible cognitions are drawn together into one" (ibid., emphasis mine).

26. On Aquila's reading, object-directedness at the most basic level becomes guaranteed by the forms of intuition. The "intuitional form as such constitutes reference to the objects of sense perception." Richard Aquila, *Representational Mind: a Study of Kant's Theory of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 56. Consequently, "the *a priori* formal features of intuition . . . are those that account for a state's being object-directed in the most basic sense of the term" (ibid., 65).

representing objects presupposes the activity of synthesis,²⁷ and this can be performed either by the understanding or by the imagination, but in accordance with the rules of the understanding. Synthesis is an activity of the mind which consists in binding heterogeneous representations into a unified representation of an object. It can be “blind,”²⁸ and so non-conscious, but not passive; thus, the mind, inasmuch as it performs the act of synthesis, “constructs” rather than merely receives the contents it entertains. To draw on a previously exploited metaphor: mere “openness to the layout of reality” does not suffice for the mind to represent objects.

Nevertheless, one may contend that Kant does not require that perceptual experiences involve judgments, since the synthesis carried out by the imagination does not result in a judgment. Perceptual experiences involve concepts, though, because representations of objects are synthesized in accordance with concepts, rules of the understanding.²⁹ Therefore, experiences would be endowed with conceptual contents but they would not have to implicate judgments. This seems to conform perfectly to McDowell’s account of the contents of experience. But does it accord with his account of perceptual reasons? At least one argument can be adduced in favor of a negative reply to this question. The argument would appeal to Kant’s characterization of the workings of the imagination as “blind,” and so non-conscious. Since perceptual reasons, as McDowell conceives of them, are always reasons for a particular subject, they must be, so to speak, in command of that subject, thus the subject must be aware of them. To use McDowell’s words: in the course of and through experience one acquires a “standing in the space of reasons.”³⁰ A subject who would not be in command of the reasons for which to hold a belief would be caused

27. “By synthesis in the most general sense . . . I understand the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition. . . . [T]he synthesis alone is that which properly collects the elements for cognitions and unifies them into a certain content; it is therefore the first thing to which we have to attend if we wish to judge about the first origin of our cognition.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 210–211 [A77/B103–A78/B103].

28. More properly, this blindness pertains to the faculty of imagination. “Synthesis in general is . . . the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious. Yet to bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense” (*ibid.*, 211 [A78/B103]).

29. Among other characteristics, such as “a faculty for thinking,” “a faculty of concepts, or also of judgments,” the understanding is also regarded by Kant as “the faculty of rules.” Insofar as the rules are objective, they “are called laws.” Hence, the understanding adopts a legislative function with regard to nature. Cf. *ibid.*, 242 [A126–7].

to hold that belief.³¹ The subject could be “exculpated” from holding the belief but the belief could not be rationally warranted. Besides, according to Kant, experiences, which result from the synthesis of imagination, do not reveal to us facts “that the *world* does us a favor of vouchsafing to us;”³² rather, the facts emerge through the very synthesis at stake. Hence, Kant’s conception of the synthesis of imagination does not seem to invite McDowell’s account of perceptual reasons.

But is it the case that, according to Kant, in order to provide reasons, perception must involve judgments? On the view of reasons I proposed at the beginning of this section, acquiring a perceptual reason amounts to recognizing a fact about a piece of mind-independent reality. For example, my seeing *that* John has dirty shoes can give rise to and justify my belief (or conjecture) that John has been walking through a muddy area. “That John has dirty shoes” is a fact about John, but my *seeing that* John has dirty shoes is my endorsement of this fact, and this implies a judgment (in this case about John’s dirty shoes). In other words, seeing that John has dirty shoes is a form of judgment about John. Does Kant share this—in fact Aristotelian³³—understanding of perception? It can be argued that, at least to a certain extent, he does. Firstly, judgments are cognitions which refer to facts in the sense that they have objective validity. Judgments mediate information about an intersubjectively accessible realm of objects, rather than about a subject’s private mental states. Secondly, Kant has a doctrine on which all representations must be able to be “accompanied” by the “I think:”³⁴ that is, it must be possible to “combine” all one’s representations in one consciousness. This “combination does not lie in the objects, . . . but is rather only an operation of the understanding.”³⁵ And, in that it represents an objective state of affairs, or a fact, to employ McDowell’s term (borrowed probably from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*), the understanding makes a judgment. For “a judgment is nothing other than the way to bring given cognitions to the *objective* unity of apperception.”³⁶ Briefly, on

30. John H. McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 4 (1995): 877.

31. This, of course, does not imply that the subject must be aware of the reasons at stake *while* entertaining his belief. The awareness must turn up, however, as soon as the subject starts to justify the belief in question.

32. McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” 887 (emphasis mine).

33. The idea that “to perceive means to judge” has been expressed by Aristotle e.g. in *Topics* 2.111a8.

34. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 246 [B131–2].

35. *Ibid.*, 248 [B134–5].

36. *Ibid.*, 251 [B141] (emphasis mine).

Kant's tenets, "openness to the layout of reality," or to the realm of facts, to use another picturesque metaphor, is given through the subject's capacity to judge, i.e. to self-consciously combine one's representations in a lawful manner, in accordance with rules prescribed by the understanding. To the extent that perception can guarantee access to the "layout of reality," it must consist in a kind of judgment.

3. MCDOWELL'S REASONS AND SKEPTICISM

Above, McDowell's perceptual reasons have been characterized as kinds of passively-taken-in thoughts. But I have also claimed that the account of perceptual reasons offered in *Mind and World* might lead to skepticism about the relation between experiences and empirical beliefs expressible in judgments. For McDowell, the reasons delivered by perception assume the form of what he regards as "appearings."³⁷ Because the contents of appearings and judgments are the same, McDowell contends that the former maintain a rational relation to the latter. But whereas judgments refer to the objects of cognition, appearings should rather be posited as merely subjective ways of perceiving objects. To illustrate the point: on the basis of it appearing to me that, say, the tower over there is round, I do not have a reason good enough to believe that the tower is round. On the contrary, if, as Descartes would say, my idea is not sufficiently clear and distinct (that is, if I have certain sufficiently strong reasons to doubt in the deliverances of my perception—and, after all, why should I not have them, considering the fact that my senses have deceived me so many times), then judging is the last thing that I, as a rational subject, should do.

For Descartes, as has been stated, judging involves a transition from subjective ideas (acts or contents of the mind) into the realm of the objective (the causes of the ideas); thus, it might be said that, metaphorically speaking, it involves bridging the gap between mind and reality. Furthermore, only judgments which are made on the basis of clear and distinct or intuitively certain ideas are sufficiently warranted. In all other cases, by making a judgment one is prone to err.³⁸ However, Descartes makes a strong metaphysical claim in order to guarantee the reliability of intuition

37. Cf. footnote 11.

38. "Now, if I abstain from making a judgment upon a topic when I do not conceive it sufficiently clearly and distinctly, it is evident that I do well and am not making a mistake; but if I decide to deny or affirm it, then I am not making a proper use of my free will. . . . For the light of nature dictates that the understanding should always know before the will makes a decision." Descartes, *Meditations*, 53 [70].

in that he introduces a non-deceiving God as the source of all clear and distinct ideas. A perfect match between cognition and reality is possible, but only on condition that God exists (and in the event that he does—that he is not a deceiver).³⁹ Now, to return to McDowell: why should transition from perception to belief be possible? Why should subjective occurrences, appearances, with which McDowell identifies perceptual reasons, suffice to justify beliefs about mind-independent reality?

Whereas Descartes introduces God as part of his strategy of defusing skepticism concerning the source of knowledge (or ideas, to use the Cartesian term), McDowell seems to evade the skeptical challenge by suggesting that it is spurious. “[M]y move is not well cast as an *answer* to skeptical challenges,” he admits, “it is more like a justification of a refusal to bother with them.”⁴⁰ And further: “The considerations I have offered suggest a way to respond to skepticism about, for instance, perceptual knowledge; the thing to do is not to answer the skeptic’s challenges, but to diagnose their seeming urgency as deriving from a misguided interiorization of reason.”⁴¹ The remedy for skepticism prescribed by McDowell turns out to consist in an externalist account of perceptual content and a disjunctive theory of perception. On this construal, what we take in when we perceive things are appearances of the world out there, independent of our subjective acts of content-acquisition. There are no intermediaries between the acts and the objects of perception. Accordingly, the fact that perception justifies empirical belief ceases to be mysterious: as in Moore’s example with two hands, the fact that one sees, say, a tree outside of the window provides a reason for one’s belief that the tree is out there. In other words, perception is *factive*, and therefore it supplies reasons for empirical beliefs.⁴² As McDowell puts it, “knowledge is a status that one possesses by virtue of an appropriate standing in the space of reasons *when . . . the world does one the favour of being so arranged that what one takes to be so is so.*”⁴³

Yet a skeptical adversary might retort that it is not obvious by any means why the world should do one a favour. Perhaps no one, Descartes in-

39. “I must examine whether there is a God as soon as an opportunity occurs, and if I find that there is one I must also investigate whether he can be a deceiver; for as long as this is unknown, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything” (*ibid.*, 32 [35]).

40. McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” 888n18.

41. *Ibid.*, 890.

42. For a discussion of McDowell’s Moorean strategy of overthrowing the skeptic, see Duncan Pritchard, “McDowell on Reasons, Externalism and Scepticism,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (2003): 273–294.

43. McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” 881 (emphasis mine).

cluded, would sanely doubt that, for example, he has two hands but, as shown by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, this kind of commonsensical belief presupposes a framework of beliefs, a certain background which a priori rules out skeptical scenarios. Our fact-endorsing perceptual beliefs rest on “hinges” which we take in without questioning.⁴⁴ On the Wittgensteinian account, such background beliefs would entertain a status similar to the one which, on the very same account, would be held by religious or ethical beliefs, an idea which has given rise to attributions of fideism to the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*.⁴⁵ Such beliefs are immune to evidence or justification, but they shape the way one perceives “worldly” facts and matters.

Thus, we may say that McDowell neither explains nor inquires into the very ground of the match between mind and world which he seems to happily endorse as a background assumption underlying the claim about the factivity of perceptual reasons.⁴⁶ Since he does not embrace the Kan-

44. Pritchard elaborates on the point in more detail: “The Wittgensteinian account of reasons has dramatic implications for any Moorean response to the sceptic, including that put forward by McDowell. For whilst Wittgenstein grants that one can offer factive reasons in favour of one’s beliefs, the manner in which he allows this deprives such reasons of having any anti-sceptical force. In ordinary contexts I can legitimately offer reasons regarding what I see in support of my beliefs about an external world, and such reasons can entail facts about that world. Nevertheless, this does not mean that one can respond to the sceptic with such factive reasons, either directly by offering factive reasons in support of one’s beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses, or indirectly by offering factive reasons in support of one’s beliefs in other propositions which entail the denials of sceptical hypotheses. This is because I am only able to coherently offer such reasons because in ordinary contexts one is (groundlessly) taking a framework of belief for granted which already excludes the truth of sceptical scenarios.” Pritchard, “McDowell on Reasons, Externalism and Scepticism,” 283–4.

45. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lectures on Religious Belief,” in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 53–72; “Lecture on Ethics,” in *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, ed. Stephen Darwall et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65–70. For Wittgensteinian fideism see Kai Nielsen, “Wittgensteinian Fideism,” *Philosophy* 42 (1967): 191–209.

46. Apparently, the strength of McDowell’s position might derive from the weakness of the position of his adversaries, that is, in general, of those who accept the “Cartesian” chasm between mind and world. As he says: “since there is no rationally satisfactory route from experiences, conceived as, in general, less than encounters with objects, glimpses of objective reality, to the epistemic position we are manifestly in, experiences must be intrinsically encounters with objects.” John H. McDowell, “The Content of Perceptual Experience,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (1994): 193. Also, McDowell seems to think that most of the problems haunting modern philosophy result from the breaking of the mind-world unity. As he writes: “It is true that modern philosophy is pervaded by apparent

tian idea that we gain access to objective reality by means of the activity of judging, and since he nevertheless seems to resist the objections that anyone subscribing to the Cartesian conception of the understanding and judgment would have to face, he must have an alternative explanation for the possibility of this access. Indeed, on McDowell's tenets, the very fact that the contents of experience are conceptual ensures that "experiences have objective purport."⁴⁷ But why should there be any such correspondence between our thoughts and the world? McDowell does not purport to appeal to the traditional metaphysical creed about the intelligibility of the world; rather, he apparently draws on a commonsensical intuition. However, as any reader of Hume will point out, the mere fact of one's belief or conviction conforming to common sense does not make the belief justified and so true.

CONCLUSION

I started this paper by presenting the standard argument for conceptualism, and focused later on the assumption that perception justifies empirical beliefs. From what has been said, one can see, however, that the assumption is far from obvious. If one assumes the Kantian or the Aristotelian account of judgment, one will be led to conclude that the kind of reasons that perception furnishes us with amount to judgments. As such, they can then be inferentially related to other judgments for which they can provide justifications. But in order to avoid regress in the chain of justifications, perceptual judgments must ultimately be grounded in some kind of impressions.⁴⁸ This invites the notorious "Myth of the Given" and the idea of perception justifying beliefs seems to be put into question.

On the other hand, if one endorses the account of judgment offered by McDowell, the following doubts emerge. If perceptual reasons are con-

problems about knowledge in particular. But I think it is helpful to see those apparent problems as more or less inept expressions of a deeper anxiety—an inchoately felt threat that a way of thinking we find ourselves falling into leaves mind simply out of touch with the rest of reality, not just questionably capable of getting to know about it." McDowell, *Mind and World*, xiii. The unity, therefore, is not something to be searched for or justified but rather something to be assumed as the point of departure for philosophizing.

47. As a matter of fact, McDowell admits to the Kantian origins of his view. The full statement reads: "This picture of visual experiences as conceptual shapings of visual consciousness is already deeply Kantian, in the way it appeals to sensibility and understanding so as to make sense of how experiences have objective purport." John H. McDowell, "Intentionality as a Relation," *The Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 9 (1998): 471.

48. Cf. Stroud, "Sense-experience and the grounding of thought."

ceived along the lines of the Cartesian deliverances of the understanding, rather than judgments about the objects of cognition, then it is difficult to see how they can provide the right kind of justification for judgments. For this would require that we bridge the divide separating the subjective and the objective, the acts or contents of the understanding and the realm of objects. One may also hold that the bridging problem does not exist, because there is no division between the subjective and the objective: the mind has unmediated access to the realm of objects—all perception is factive. In this case, there is also no distinction between the contents of perception and the objects perceived or, to use different terminology, between an intentional object and a real object given in perception. But this is also just the kind of scenario in which one unquestioningly believes the deliverances of one's senses—where whatever “reasons” there may be, such as are provided by perceptual experiences, might be equally good (or bad) as regards their capacity for justifying perceptual beliefs. This, in turn, means that the idea of perception justifying empirical belief loses its appeal.⁴⁹

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aquila, Richard. *Representational Mind: a Study of Kant's Theory of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- Brewer, Bill. *Perception and Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Chuard, Philippe. “Perceptual Reasons” (ms). http://philrsss.anu.edu.au/people-defaults/philippe/perceptual_reasons.pdf.
- Crowther, Timothy M. “Two Conceptions of Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism.” *Erkenntnis* 65 (2006): 245–276.
- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Lawrence J. Lafleur. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1951.
- Drestke, Fred. “Meaningful Perception.” In *An Invitation to Cognitive Science: Visual Cognition*, edited by Daniel N. Osherson, Stephen M. Kosslyn, and Lila R. Gleitman, 331–352. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1995.
- . “Simple Seeing.” In *Perception, Knowledge and Belief. Selected Essays*, 97–112. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- . “What We See. The Texture of Conscious Experience.” In *Perceiving the World*, edited by Bence Nanay, 54–67. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Gunther, York H. “General Introduction.” In *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, edited by York H. Gunther, 1–20. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2003.
- Janowski, Zbigniew. *Cartesian Theodicy—Descartes' Quest for Certitude*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002.

49. I would like to thank the anonymous referee for *Forum Philosophicum* for helpful remarks on an earlier version of this paper.

- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Larmore, Charles. "Attending to Reasons." In *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, edited by Nicholas H. Smith, 193–208. London; New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Macarthur, David. "McDowell, Scepticism, and the 'Veil of Perception.'" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 2 (2003): 175–190.
- Martin, Michael G. "Perception, Concepts and Memory." *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 4 (1992): 745–763.
- McDowell, John H. "The Content of Perceptual Experience." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (1994): 190–205.
- . "Knowledge and the Internal." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 4 (1995): 877–893.
- . *Mind and World*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- . "Reply to Commentators." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, no. 2 (1998): 403–31.
- . "Intentionality as a Relation." *The Journal of Philosophy* 95, no. 9 (1998): 471–490.
- Nielsen, Kai. "Wittgensteinian Fideism." *Philosophy* 42 (1967): 191–209.
- Peacocke, Christopher. "Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content." *Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 5 (2001): 239–264.
- Pritchard, Duncan. "McDowell on Reasons, Externalism and Scepticism." *European Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (2003): 273–294.
- Stroud, Barry. "Sense-experience and the grounding of thought." In *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, edited by Nicholas H. Smith, 79–91. London; New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "Lectures on Religious Belief." In *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett 53–72. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "Lecture on Ethics." In *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, edited by Stephen Darwall et al., 65–70. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Wright, Crispin. "McDowell's Oscillation." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, no. 2 (1998): 395–402.
- Yolton, John W. *Perception and Reality: a History from Descartes to Kant*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.