

## On Perceiving That

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In *Mind and World* and related work, John McDowell develops a rich and original picture of the intentional in its various aspects. This emphatically non-reductive account he labels “naturalized platonism”. Naturalized platonism, aspiring to be the “discovery that gives philosophy peace” (McDowell 1994: 86, cf. PI 133), thus is not a position resulting from “constructive philosophy”; McDowell explicitly endorses what he calls Wittgenstein’s “quietism”. Rather, naturalized platonism is achieved via a “diagnostic deconstruction” (McDowell 1992: 51) of the various dilemmas besetting traditional modern philosophy’s attempts to come to terms with the realm of intentional phenomena.

In *Mind and World*, McDowell takes perception as an “object lesson” for naturalized platonism (McDowell 1994: 85). Traditional modern epistemology, or so McDowell claims, is trapped in a seemingly interminable oscillation between two equally untenable positions: the Myth of the Given and coherentism. McDowell’s favorite metaphor for describing dilemmatic situations like this is “recoil”: problems with the Myth of the Given, for instance, present themselves to us like an abyss suddenly yawning open in front of our feet. Anxiety stricken, we recoil and jump backwards, as far backwards as possible. Anxiety, however, carries us too far; we jump backwards only to find ourselves confronted by another, equally terrible sight, here, the chasm of coherentism. Mixing metaphors, McDowell characterizes the resulting fear-driven commotion as a “seesaw” (McDowell 1994: 9).

Dismounting the seesaw requires realizing that traditional philosophy shows a “blind spot” here (McDowell 1994: 14), appearing to be “blocked” (McDowell 1994: 18) from seeing the way out. Dismounting the seesaw requires understanding that the real motivation behind the oscillation is not merely an epistemological worry; what is at stake here, or so McDowell argues, is *the very idea of empirical content*. Without what he calls a “minimal empiricism” (McDowell 1996a: 231), the idea of thoughts and beliefs with empirical content becomes unintelligible. The situation, then, is this: On the Scylla-side, coherentism gives up on even a minimal empiricism, and thus poses a threat to empirical content. Empiricism, however, seems to drive us into the inconsistencies of the Myth of the Given, the Charybdis-side. According to McDowell, adopting naturalized platonism about perception is the one and only way out, the way that remained hidden from view for traditional philosophy.

In this paper, I shall not be concerned with perception as an object lesson -- neither for a more general stance towards the intentional nor for a demonstration of Wittgenstein-inspired

philosophical method. Rather, I shall concentrate on McDowell's account of perception as a contribution to the theory of content.<sup>1</sup> I shall first develop McDowell's line of argument in more detail (section 1) and then provide a critical examination of the resulting view of perception (section 2).

### **1. Perception, Coherentism and the Myth of the Given**

In *Mind and World*, McDowell launches his attack on coherentism by taking issue with the epistemological position developed and held by Donald Davidson. Davidson has famously denounced what he calls the dualism of scheme and content as the third dogma of empiricism (cf. Davidson 1974). Instead, he suggests doing without sense-data, impressions or any other items functioning as "epistemic intermediaries" altogether (cf. Davidson 1989). Empiricism, Davidson says, "like other isms, we can define pretty much as we please, but I take it to involve not only the pallid claim that all knowledge of the world comes through the agency of the senses, but also the conviction that this fact is of prime epistemological significance. The pallid idea merely recognizes the obvious causal role of the senses in mediating between objects and events in the world and our thought and talk about them; empiricism locates the ultimate evidence for those thoughts at this intermediate step" (Davidson 1990: 68). For Davidson, dispensing with the epistemic intermediaries therefore amounts to renouncing empiricism in any interesting sense. It means, to use Sellars' famous phrase, to retire the "Myth of the Given", the myth that the ultimate evidence is given to us in the deliverances of the senses. Davidson summarizes his reason for this move as follows: "The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes" (Davidson 1983: 311). But if the relation is not logical, what is it? Davidson: "The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal" (ibid.). Thus, he arrives at the conclusion: "nothing can be a reason for a belief except another belief" (Davidson 1983: 310), coupled with his own brand of the causal theory of perception.

According to McDowell, the Davidsonian position just sketched amounts to a "coherentist" epistemology (McDowell 1994: 14). And even though Davidson is right in criticizing and even giving up on the dualism of scheme and content, retreating into coherentism is just one of those moves too far backwards. According to McDowell, Davidson has given up what is indispensable in traditional empiricism together with what is hopeless. He has a "blind spot" (McDowell 1994: 14) here, and does not see any other possibility. "Of course", McDowell

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<sup>1</sup> Despite McDowell's confessing to "quietism", I don't think there is reason to doubt that his account of perception is, besides being an "object lesson", intended as such a contribution. Of course, this is a thoroughly non-reductivist account; that, however, does not - and does not have to - prevent McDowell from arguing for rather surprising and interesting claims. See also note 11 below.

says, “Davidson believes that his position is a place where thought can come to rest, not a movement in an interminable oscillation. But I think he contrives to make it seem so only by going insufficiently deeply into the motivation for the Myth of the Given” (McDowell 1994: 15). What Davidson does not see is that empiricism “captures a condition for it to be intelligible that thoughts are otherwise than empty” (McDowell 1996: 9). What does that mean?

In *Mind and World*, McDowell starts out by quoting Kant: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (KdrV A 51/B75). He identifies Kantian concepts with the scheme-part of Davidson’s dualism, and content or intuitions with sensory intake.<sup>2</sup> He says: “I began with the thought that is expressed in Kant’s remark: *the very idea of representational content*, not just the idea of judgements that are adequately justified, requires an interplay between concepts and intuitions, bits of experiential intake” (McDowell 1994: 6, *emph. mine*). To require such “interplay”, McDowell suggests, already means to adopt an interesting, if minimal empiricism (cf. McDowell 1996a: 231f; 1996: 3f). Sensory intake, in other words, has to provide *reasons* or *justifications* for beliefs. For this to be possible, sensory intake has to stand in an inferential relationship to beliefs, a relationship of evidential support.

Traditionally, empiricism was motivated by an “obsession with epistemic security” (McDowell 1996: 9) that is “fundamental to modern epistemology” (McDowell 1996: 11). However, rather than providing safe foundations for knowledge, the very intermediaries characteristic of empiricism make it forever vulnerable to skepticism. Skepticism, too, is the threat motivating Davidson both in what he gives up and what he defends. He takes pains to argue that a system of beliefs cannot but be mostly true and concludes: “belief is in its nature veridical” (Davidson 1983: 314). According to McDowell, however, this is at most a shallow victory. Because he severs the inferential links with sensory intake, all Davidson can do is assure us that *if* we have beliefs they are bound to be mostly true. But he does nothing to ensure *that* we do have any. In fact, the Davidsonian picture in which “we cannot get outside our beliefs” (McDowell 1994: 16) makes that impossible: “we can have *empirical content* in our picture *only* if we can acknowledge that thoughts and intuitions are rationally connected. By rejecting that, Davidson undermines his right to the idea that his purportedly reassuring argument starts from, the idea of a body of beliefs” (McDowell 1994: 17/18, *emph. mine*).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am not concerned with the exegetical merits of McDowell’s reading of Kant here. But see Friedman 1996 for critical remarks on this.

<sup>3</sup> This is a *prima facie* surprising charge against someone who argues that “the causal relations between our beliefs and speech and the world *also supply the interpretation of our language and of our beliefs*” (Davidson 1982: 332, *emph. mine*) and that, *therefore*,

The deep motivation for empiricism, therefore, is *not* the quest for epistemic security but the alleged fact that empiricism “captures a condition for it to be intelligible that thoughts are otherwise than empty” (McDowell 1996: 9). McDowell claims, in other words, that rational relations between empirical beliefs and sensory intake are a necessary condition on empirical content.

McDowell likes to put this point in terms of “constraint”, more precisely, of constraint “from outside thought” (McDowell 1994: 8). He also likes to use the Kantian dichotomy of spontaneity and receptivity in this context, characterizing the conceptual as a “realm of spontaneity”, a “realm of freedom” in need of restriction from outside. McDowell’s playing up this freedom in terms hardly congenial to Kant – he talks of our capacity to “decide whether or not to judge” (McDowell 1994: 11) something – should not lead us to misinterpret him here, however. The conceptual is itself subject to norms of rationality, i.e. constraints as to what counts as a reason for what. Inferential relations are what the conceptual is built of – with Sellars, McDowell characterizes the “space of concepts” as the “space of reasons” (cf. McDowell 1994: 5, Sellars 1956:169). His point is, therefore, that these relations have to extend to reasons that are not themselves beliefs, but constraining what it is possible to believe: “What we wanted was a reassurance that when we use our concepts in judgement, our freedom – our spontaneity in the exercise of our understanding – is constrained from outside thought, and constrained in a way that we can appeal to in displaying the judgements as justified” (McDowell 1994: 8).<sup>4</sup>

In traditional empiricism, it is the sensory given that functions as such a constraint, as the famous “tribunal” Quine talks of. Thus, empiricism seems inextricably bound up with the very myth McDowell tries to deconstruct. The problem with that myth, however, is not merely that it invites skepticism to stay; according to McDowell, the problem is more serious. Traditional empiricism identifies the ultimate evidence as impressions or sense-data. They are the content in the dualism of scheme and content, the extra-conceptual given. However, nothing given as a mere sense-datum or some such is of a nature to stand in inferential

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no “basic sort of evidence on which our knowledge of the world could rest” (ibid.) is needed. This idea is almost completely neglected in McDowell’s text (but see note 4 below).

<sup>4</sup> For McDowell, both components of this condition on content are essential: The constraint has to come from outside thought *and* it has to be available as a reason to the judging subject. As he makes quite clear in his “Reply to Brandom”, it is for this reason that he does not accept reliabilist construals of constraint from outside thought as satisfying his condition (cf. McDowell 1996b: 293f). This condition is intended to capture “how the believer is in touch with her world” (McDowell 1994: 17, fn. 14), intended to ensure, that is, that beliefs not only have empirical content but empirical content that is accessible from a first person point of view. It is for this reason, too, that McDowell thinks Davidson’s idea of having causal relations supply empirical content (see above, note 2) fails; according to him, “the objects that the interpreter sees the subject’s beliefs as being about become, as it were, merely noumenal so far as the subject is concerned” (ibid.). This complaint rests on a lonely remark by Davidson on brains in vats that Rorty reports and squares badly with Davidson’s account of first person authority as a condition on the possibility of interpretation (cf. Davidson 1984). However, our topic here is not so much McDowell’s reading of Davidson as understanding and assessing his own position.

relations, to be a reason or evidence for any belief whatsoever. Nothing can be a reason and *extra-conceptual*, and as long as the dualism is in place, this means that nothing can be a reason and a bit of the given at the same time. Thus traditional empiricism, with its Myth of the Given, turns out to be plainly incoherent (cf. McDowell 1996: 4). What it tries to do, in McDowell's metaphor, is to extend the space of reasons beyond the space of concepts, to make something a reason that does not have any propositional content. However, there simply are no inferential relations between things with propositional content and things without. The space of concepts and the space of reasons are coextensive.

There seems to be, then, just one option left, the one that Davidson takes: he accepts that sensory intake cannot stand in inferential relations and therefore gives up on empiricism. For McDowell, that amounts to losing the "friction" (McDowell 1994: 11) necessary between a system of beliefs and sensory intake for ensuring empirical content – there is no guarantee now that what we took for a system of beliefs is not a mere "frictionless spinning in a void" (McDowell 1994: 11). Traditionally, this vision would have driven us back into the arms of the Given, arms now no longer open to us.

McDowell tries to make us realize that there is another option, an option that really amounts to a way out of the apparent dilemma. Acknowledging loss of empirical content as the real threat, this option becomes visible; we can, or so McDowell claims, complete our dilemma's deconstruction by questioning what *both* coherentism and the Myth of the Given take for granted: that sensory intake is non-propositional. It is this conviction that renders the myth incoherent and thus motivates giving up on empiricism. But, McDowell suggests, it is perfectly possible to renounce this premise. Moreover, it is necessary to do so for only thus can we escape between Scylla and Charybdis. What he suggests amounts to a way of giving up the idea of an extra-conceptual given without losing empiricism as well. The idea is to *conceptualize the given*: "We should understand what Kant calls 'intuition' – experiential intake – not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content. In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*. That is the sort of thing one can also, for instance, judge" (McDowell 1994: 9).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, perceptions do stand in inferential relations, can be reasons for beliefs. At the same time, not being beliefs, perceptions work as the required constraint "from outside thought". And empiricism, freed from mythology, ceases to be inconsistent.

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<sup>5</sup> According to this model, the so-called deliverances of the senses are propositional in character. According to McDowell, we are not born with conceptualized perceptual capacities. Rather it is our "second nature" (McDowell 1994: 84) thus to perceive the world, a second nature acquired in our upbringing, through our "Bildung" (ibid.) and through language acquisition. Such "initiation" (ibid.) into the space of reasons according to McDowell irrevocably changes the content of our perceptions (cf. McDowell 1981: 241).

## 2. Empiricism Regained?

I would now like to examine the suggested propositional view of perception in some more detail. According to McDowell, the space of reasons and the space of concepts are coextensive. Empiricism, however, requires that the space of reasons is wider than what we may call the space of belief. There have to be reasons that are not beliefs. Otherwise, a necessary condition on empirical content, the condition that beliefs are restricted by belief-independent reality, is not met. My main question in this section will be whether McDowell's model itself meets this condition. Are propositional perceptions really reasons that are not beliefs? However, I shall also ask whether empiricism as a condition on empirical content does indeed amount to the demand that there be reasons that are not beliefs. We shall start with this second question and approach it by comparing McDowell's model with Davidson's. How do they perform with regard to the empiricist condition? And what exactly does this condition amount to?

Empiricism doesn't merely claim that perceptions are reasons for empirical belief; rather, perceptions are to be "last" or "ultimate" reasons. They are to provide a "foundation" for empirical knowledge. Despite the shift of emphasis from epistemology to content, this element of traditional empiricism is emphasized by McDowell, too: "When we trace the ground for an empirical judgement, the last step takes us to experiences. Experiences already have conceptual content, so this last step does not take us outside the space of concepts. But it takes us to something in which sensibility – receptivity – is operative, so we need no longer to be unnerved by the freedom implicit in the idea that our conceptual capacities belong to a faculty of spontaneity. We need not worry that our picture leaves out the external constraint that is required if exercises of our conceptual capacities are to be recognizable as bearing on the world at all" (McDowell 1994: 10).

However, on McDowell's construal perceptions not only have propositional content, but these propositions are propositions about *external things*. And both the propositional and the externalist nature of such perceptions makes it hard to see how they could be ultimate reasons at all.<sup>6</sup> The first problem should not come as a surprise to the reader of Sellars: Does not being propositional, i.e. standing in inferential relations, always mean both being able to *be* a reason and to *have* reasons? After all, inferential relations between *p* and *q* can be used in both directions, to argue for the truth (or falsity) of *p* or of *q*. And this holds for perceptual

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<sup>6</sup> McDowellian perception is externalist in the sense of its content being about external objects, not objects "before the mind". Moreover, consisting of propositions "given" to him, the content of his perceptions depends on factors external to and independent

propositions as well as for any other. This is stressed by Sellars when he writes: “There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions – observations reports – which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of ‘foundation’ is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former” (Sellars 1956: 170).<sup>7</sup> If we conceive of perceptions as propositional, that is, the reasons that perception provides for empirical belief cannot be reasons that cannot themselves be given reasons for. These are clearly not the self-verifying episodes of traditional empiricism.

We can reach the same result by considering the externalist nature of the propositions perception delivers. In perception, McDowell says, we take in *that things are thus and so*. The objects of perception are external objects and therefore these propositions surely do not possess the immunity to falsity the intermediaries were to confer on traditional observation reports, either. Propositions about external things, even if taken in in perception, surely can be false.

Despite his foundationalist jargon, McDowell clearly shows awareness of both of these points. For instance, McDowell explicitly acknowledges that the propositions delivered by perception not only can be false but that we can have reason to judge them so. He says: “Minimally, it must be possible to decide whether or not to judge that things are as one’s experience represents them to be. How one’s experience represents things to be is not under one’s control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it” (McDowell 1994: 11). Again, the rhetoric of freedom should not mislead us here; as pointed out above, the freedom to believe or not to believe is subject to constitutive “norms of rationality” and to “reject” an appearance simply means to come to the conclusion that a particular proposition delivered by perception is false. For this, there are reasons, (other) empirical beliefs from which we infer that things are other than thus and so. As McDowell illustrates it with a familiar example: “In the Müller-Lyer illusion, one’s experience represents the two lines as being unequally long, but someone *in the know* will refrain from judging that that is how

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of the believer. However, in *Mind and World* at least, perception does not appear to be externalist in the sense of the concepts figuring in its contents being determined by anything other than their inferential relations.

<sup>7</sup> McDowell explicitly acknowledges that the point made by Sellars about observation reports carries over to his perceptual experiences. Commenting on a description of his picture as foundationalist, he in fact mimics the passage just quoted and says: “There is indeed a relation of rational dependence, of what (if this were the whole story) we might be tempted to call ‘superstructure’ on what we might be tempted to call ‘foundations’. But just because concepts are involved in experience, and the conceptual realm is a seamless web of rational interconnections, there is also a rational dependence (of a different sort) in the opposite direction. We would have to say that, in respect of this other dimension of rational dependence, the ‘foundations’ are partly held in place by the ‘superstructure’, and that makes the image of foundations unhappy” (McDowell 1996b: 284).

things are” (McDowell 1994: 11, fn. 9, *emph. mine*). If, however, the (other) empirical beliefs can be reasons for rejecting an appearance, they equally can be cited as reasons when we accept it. Thus, it should be clear that on McDowell’s view perceptual reasons are not ultimate in the sense of not being able to have reasons themselves or of being certain. We have to conclude, therefore, that for him perceptions pose the required constraint on empirical belief without possessing the certainty and self-verification characteristic of traditional empiricist ultimate evidence. The question, then, is this: How can perceptions constrain belief without being ultimate reasons?

The answer seems to lie in their being received in perception as opposed to the freedom or “spontaneity” of belief. The mere *passivity* of perception, McDowell urges, is enough to secure empirical content: “The fact that experience is passive, a matter of receptivity in operation, should assure us that we have all the external constraint we can reasonably want” (McDowell 1994: 28). Unfortunately, I am not assured at all. As we have seen, what is passively received in perception is a proposition that we can “accept” or “reject”. That is, we *can* take it as a reason for further belief *but we don’t have to*. The passivity, therefore, is restricted to the proposition received; it does not extend to its being a reason. Therefore, passivity does not seem to restrict what we believe at all; “rejected” and “accepted” perceptual propositions are equally passive. However, empirical belief does in fact appear to be restricted by what we perceive – perceptions do have a specific epistemic role and weight, they are difficult to override, there has to be an explanation of the illusory experience and so on. Perceptual propositions, in other words, certainly are of relative ultimativity. With passive reception instead of epistemic weight McDowell seems to have picked the wrong characteristic. Passivity, though in some sense it may distinguish what’s delivered through the senses from other intentional states, does not mark those perceptions that restrict further belief as opposed to those that can be disregarded.<sup>8</sup>

However, if we try to understand constraint by “experience” as relative fundamentality of perceptual intake, as seems sensible to do, I do not see what the difference between

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<sup>8</sup> In his review of *Mind and World*, Michael Friedman draws attention to the fact that mere passivity does not suffice to distinguish experience of an experience-independent reality from the so-called “impressions of inner sense” (cf. Friedman 1996: 443). These are, as McDowell is well aware, as passive and hence, according to him, as constraining as those of “outer” sense (cf. McDowell 1994: 21f). Friedman’s point is very different from ours; he does not find fault with the idea of passivity ensuring constraint but ultimately aims at charging McDowell’s way of distinguishing between impressions of “inner” and “outer” sense with idealism (cf. Friedman 1996: 464), a charge whose merits cannot be discussed here. It might not be quite beside our point, however, to note a certain egalitarian trend here; in acknowledging “inner” and “outer” sense to be equally constraining, McDowell seems to deny any epistemic asymmetry between our knowledge of the external world and our so-called self-knowledge. But this does not sit so well with acknowledging that impressions of “outer” sense can be *false*. For, contrary to Brandom’s interpretation of the relevant passages (cf. Brandom 1996: 247), it is *not* their ability of being false (and of being judged so in the light of other beliefs) that, according to McDowell, distinguishes impressions of “outer” sense. Rather, it is the fact “that what appears to be the case is understood as fraught with implications for the subject’s cognitive situation in the world: for instance, that she is confronted by an object with a facing surface illuminated in such-and-such ways” (McDowell 1994: 32).



McDowell's and Davidson's model is supposed to amount to anymore. If all a coherent empiricism demands is that perceptual deliverances are propositional and externalist in character, passive in reception and restrictive of empirical belief in a specific way, these demands are all clearly met by a Davidsonian account of perception. Here, however, perception itself plays a merely causal, and not an epistemologically significant, role. In perception, *beliefs* are caused. Such beliefs clearly are passively received. They might be false but are still of relative ultimativity (cf. Davidson 1975: 169). They not only are about external objects but about objects identifiable as common causes for the beliefs of different believers (cf. Davidson 1983). The only remaining difference between the models seems to be that according to McDowell, a perceptual experience is *not* a belief.

This requirement *results* from the requirement that belief be rationally restricted by sensory intake, however. Obviously, McDowell takes the empiricist requirement to be satisfied only by reasons which are not beliefs. This seems to be mistaken, however; all the reasons for demanding that there be reasons which are not beliefs, all the conditions set up in the original empiricist requirement on empirical content, seem to be met by perceptually caused belief as well. Therefore it simply is not clear anymore why there have to be reasons that are not beliefs. It is not clear anymore why holding that only a belief can be a reason for another belief confines us into a circle "spinning in a void". Or, if it does, there does not seem to be any reason to think otherwise of the model of propositional perception. Both satisfy the empiricist requirement equally well.

We should press this point even harder, I am afraid. We should ask whether McDowell's own model really presents a workable conception of reasons that are not beliefs. Remembering Davidson's line quoted earlier: "The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes" (Davidson 1983: 311), we have to ask how McDowell's perceptions are to be distinguished from beliefs at all. Don't they have to be propositional *attitudes* to be reasons? Moreover, don't they have to be *beliefs*?

McDowell argues that if there aren't any reasons that are not beliefs all our thoughts lose their "bearing on the world" (McDowell 1994: 11). Beliefs would not be beliefs about the world, would not be beliefs at all.<sup>9</sup> This claim requires careful reading. The real issue is not

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<sup>9</sup> This can, prima facie at least, mean either that no belief-*attitudes* are taken to empirical contents or that there are no such *contents* to take any attitude to. There are passages in McDowell that could be cited in support of the first reading; McDowell sometimes describes the threat of emptiness as follows: "we do not yet have in view anything we could recognize as the *embracing* of beliefs or theories, the *adoption of determinate stands or commitments* as to how things are in the world" (McDowell 1996: 1, all emph. mine). Nevertheless, the evidence is too massive against this reading, especially in *Mind and World* where the following passage for instance clearly forces the second reading: "Davidson manages to be comfortable with his coherentism, which dispenses with rational constraint on thinking from outside it, only because he does not see that emptiness is the threat. He thinks the only point

whether our beliefs are justified, not even if they are true at all; this would just be skepticism. Even false beliefs have empirical content, and McDowell's threat is supposed to go deeper, to amount to a loss of content. His claim, therefore, must be that without "rational connection" (McDowell 1994: 68) to experience nothing can be (empirically) true or false at all.

Now, I think we are at a point where we can see that either McDowell's model does not pay his own bill or that perceptual reasons have to be beliefs after all. On a weak reading, that there are "rational connections" between perceptions and beliefs simply means that perception delivers propositions that stand in inferential relations to believed propositions. Thus, an empirical belief  $q$  might be evidentially supported by a perceptual proposition  $pp$ . But in this kind of relation  $q$  in fact stands to quite a large number of other such propositions, including *not-pp*. Whether you actually take any of them in does not matter at all to there being such inferential relations. Now, remember, according to McDowell in perceiving we "take in *that things are thus and so*", for instance, that there is a red book in front of me. Let's call all such propositions  $pp$ -propositions. Is McDowell merely claiming that without inferential relations to  $pp$ -propositions there is no empirical content to anything that might "follow" from them?

Indeed,  $pp$ -propositions are empirical propositions par excellence; if no  $pp$ -propositions would follow from beliefs, these could hardly be called empirical. If we have beliefs, that is, propositions of the  $pp$ -kind surely follow from them. This consideration, however, is not one that McDowell can take around to make it into a condition on empirical belief met only by propositions taken in in experience. Such demand appears to be idle: whether any of them are taken in or not does not make any difference to a proposition's inferential connections. Neither the  $pp$ -proposition nor its relations come into being by being taken in. Quite clearly it cannot be the mere existence of inferential relations between  $pp$ -propositions and empirical beliefs that McDowell's demand of "rational connections" amounts to. In fact, he is explicit about this: "What we wanted was a reassurance that when we use our concepts in judgement, our freedom – our spontaneity in the exercise of our understanding – is constrained from outside thought, and constrained in a way *that we can appeal to in displaying the judgements as justified*" (McDowell 1994: 8, *emph. mine*). Perception, and so we have of course read McDowell all along, is supposed to give *reasons* for holding beliefs, to be a "tribunal". Inferential relations are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for there being reasons for belief.

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of wanting a rational connection between intuitions and thought is reassurance that we are justified in endorsing the thoughts, as if we could take it for granted in any case that they are thoughts, that they possess content" (McDowell 1994: 68). In the first passage, the emphasis, therefore, should not be on "embracing" or the "adoption of stands" but on "as to how things are in the world".

I have taken some pains about the last point because I hope that now, my problem with this stronger reading of “rational connections” will become quite clear. On this reading, perception is supposed to deliver reasons for beliefs. But as we already have seen above, the demand that the reason-giving propositions be taken in passively through perception appears curiously idle here, too. Unless “taking in” is another sort of *propositional attitude*. A mere proposition is no more a reason than a mere bit of extra-conceptual given. A proposition is a reason only if we take an *attitude* towards it. Of course,  $q$  is supported by  $pp$  – but you have a reason for inferring  $q$  only if you *hold  $pp$  to be true*. You have, in other words, to *believe that  $pp$* . Perceptions, be they as conceptual or propositional as you like, are reasons only if you believe that the proposition delivered is true.<sup>10</sup>

To sum this discussion up: Not only does McDowell’s conception of perception as propositional not appear to do any work that cannot be done as well by a Davidsonian model, moreover, his perceptions turn out to be beliefs in disguise. What are we to conclude from all this? That despite McDowell’s efforts we still are trapped in coherentism? Spinning in a void? McDowell seems to have one last argument to this effect; in a footnote to “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism” he says: “It does not help to say that impacts from the world cause beliefs, which can then serve as a tribunal for world views to face. These beliefs would be just more items of the same kind as the items that make up world views. The question we are considering is how there can be anything of that kind (...), and it is unresponsive to help ourselves to some – the causal ancestry that we cite for the ones we help ourselves to makes no difference to this” (McDowell 1996: 9, fn. 12).

Is this what is left to do? To answer the question: “How can there be any empirical beliefs?” by saying: “Well, some of them are simply caused, and then, others follow”? That would be sad, indeed. But again, we have to be careful with the demand put forward; this surely cannot be a demand for a reductive account of empirical belief. Given McDowell’s anti-reductionism, what can we legitimately do to answer a question like this? What does McDowell himself do? He sets up a condition on the possibility of contentful belief: conceptualized empiricism. This condition, if I am right, is met by Davidson. And even if I

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<sup>10</sup>This point seems to me to hold quite generally, no matter how McDowell’s reason giving propositions are construed. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile pointing out that this point does not depend on my reading of the reasons perception give as  $pp$ -propositions, propositions expressed by sentences like:

(PP) There is a red book in front of me.

We might be tempted to argue that the reasons McDowell is talking about rather are expressed by sentences like

(PPP) I see that there is a red book in front of me.

And that would be a reason for holding PP true. But this does not help, and for two reasons. First, to have a reason for holding PP true, I have to hold PPP true. And here, the traditional empiricist counter: But how could I be mistaken about that? is not only besides the point but even false. It is besides the point for even a self-verifying belief is still a belief. And it is false because of the externalist character of McDowellian perception; it is perfectly possible for PPP to be false. PPP is false, if there is no red book in front of me. So, PPP is a reason for anything only if I also hold PP true. Therefore, it secondly seems quite appropriate to construe the reason giving propositions as  $pp$ -propositions right away.

am wrong about this, it still does not follow that Davidson merely helps himself to some beliefs; he clearly sets up what he takes to be necessary conditions on the possibility of empirical belief, conditions to do with the specific weight of perceptually caused belief and its intersubjective accessibility. These are conditions of exactly the kind needed to avert the charge of *vicious* circularity implied by McDowell's complaint, conditions in this respect quite on a par with conceptualized empiricism.<sup>11</sup>

We are left with the conclusion, then, that a Davidsonian model fulfills McDowell's condition on empirical content quite as well as his own conception of perception; the latter, therefore, cannot count as the only way of having constraint by belief independent reality in our picture. Perception that things are thus and so being fallible, the idea of such constraint has to be reformulated in terms of epistemic weight instead of that of mere passivity of reception. Consequently, however, McDowell has given no persuasive reason for demanding reasons that are not beliefs, a demand, moreover, that McDowell himself does not succeed in meeting; his perceptions turn out to be beliefs in disguise. If this leaves us trapped in coherentism, we better look for a new way out.\*

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<sup>11</sup> Regarding McDowell, however, it might seem as if thus setting up necessary conditions on empirical content amounts to violating his own strictures on philosophical method. In a different context, Boghossian, for instance, has argued that the quietism implied by McDowell's anti-reductionism is violated by his own practice (cf. Boghossian 1989: 534f). This complaint does not seem justified, however; McDowell takes some pains to spell out what he confesses to in espousing quietism (cf. esp. McDowell 1992: 50f), namely dispensing with reductive accounts formulated in independent terminology. As far as I can see and hope to argue for at greater length elsewhere, none of the necessary conditions on intentionality that he defends violate this condition. Of what interest such an account is, is another matter, also to be discussed elsewhere.

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