

A Critique and Defense of John McDowell's Perceptual Conceptualism

Enoch Yim

1

We have empirical knowledge when our thoughts represent how things are. How is this knowledge possible? To answer this question, we must account for how our minds interact with facts in such a way that we could have empirical knowledge. Our minds come in contact with the world through experience, bits of whose intake John McDowell calls 'intuitions.'¹ Given this set-up, we can make sense of our claim to empirical knowledge by identifying what kind of content intuitions have and explaining how they are related to our thoughts. Two of the main approaches to this problem are epistemic naturalism and McDowell's perceptual conceptualism. Naturalists contend that intuitions have non-conceptual contents and that they are related to our thoughts as causal impacts. In contrast, McDowell construes intuitions as endowed with conceptual contents, which stand in a rational relation to our thoughts. McDowell's view is motivated by naturalism's failure to accommodate the idea that, to claim empirical knowledge, we must *get things right* in light of our experience. In this essay, I will defend McDowell's construal of intuition by addressing Hannah Ginsborg's criticisms of his view; in doing so, I will also critique his view by examining its shortcomings and suggest a provisional way to make a case for them.

In §2, I will explain how naturalism fails to confer normative significance on intuition. In §3, I will explicate McDowell's view, which is that intuitions are (a) conceptual and (b) passive; the former characterization renders intuition normatively significant, and the latter distinguishes intuitions from thoughts. In §4 and §5, I will address Ginsborg's two criticisms directed at these

¹ John McDowell, *Mind and World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, 1996), 4.

two characterizations of intuition. I argue that the first criticism either falsely accuses McDowell of committing the error of coherentism or advances a dubious picture of our conceptual outlook. The second criticism helps expose an oversight in McDowell's construal, but provides no decisive objection against his view. The oversight is that McDowell takes for granted the notion of "openness," which is crucial to his account of intuition. In §6, I will briefly discuss how to overcome this oversight by sketching out a way to enrich the notion.

2

It may naturally occur to us that we should construe intuitions as having non-conceptual contents for the following reason. The contents of our thoughts are propositional. A proposition is a saturated conceptual function; concepts are unsaturated functions, whose saturation results in propositions. In turn, concepts are logically interrelated as their saturations presuppose and imply one another. Thus, by having thoughts, we occupy the *space* of reasons in which we can engage in discursive activities such as giving reasons for (i.e., justifying) our thoughts. Likewise, our thoughts belong to the realm constituted of concepts by virtue of which we can make inferences about our beliefs and judgements. One way to picture how our thoughts are grounded on facts is to conceive the world as impinging on us from *outside* the space of reasons. On this assumption, we distinguish intuitions (i.e., intakes of sensorial impingements) from thoughts by attributing to them contents other than concepts; the outcome is the view that the contents of intuitions are, as McDowell puts it, "non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thoughts[.]"²

The challenge for this view is then to show how non-conceptual contents of intuitions are related to our thoughts in such a way that we could appeal to intuitions in justifying our beliefs.

² *ibid.*, 7.

One response to this challenge is (epistemic) naturalism, which attempts to explain the relation in causal terms. On this view, if a certain representational content appearing at an earlier stage in our cognitive process is causally correlated with a conceptual one at a later stage, the former justifies the latter; what it is for our thoughts to represent how things are is for them to have been caused by (our intakes of) the relevant impingements.³ That is, intuitions are construed as what cause us to have certain beliefs and judgements about the world.⁴

The problem with this view is that it fails to confer normative significance on intuition, the consequence of which could be understood as vulnerability to skepticism. What gives me the right to claim, e.g., that my necktie is blue, is the condition that my experiences unveil to me how things are. But, if my belief is grounded only in its casual transaction with the world, things could in fact be different from how they appear to me. It could rather be that I am triggered to think of a green necktie while the necktie itself is blue. If so, nothing warrants that what my senses report to me correspond with reality. In that case, I am only entitled to the belief that the necktie *looks* green to me, and it is an impossible task to go from how things *look* to how things *are*. Likewise, if our intuitions are only causal, they come short of telling us whether *we got things right*, in which case it is difficult to see how we are to ground our empirical claims to knowledge; mere causal impacts are incapable of playing any justificatory role. Thus, we cannot hold together that intuitions are only causal *and* justify our thoughts in our appeal to them.

This problem motivates Donald Davidson (and, according to Anil Gupta, Wilfrid Sellars as well⁵) to reject the approach above and endorse the coherentist view that “nothing can count

³ Jerry A. Fodor, *Hume Variation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 50.

⁴ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 8.

⁵ Anil Gupta, *Conscious Experience: A Logical Inquiry*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 33-43.

as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.”⁶ According to this view, crudely put, the impacts may cause us to have certain thoughts, but our thoughts are justified (or, supported) only by the coherency (or consistency) among themselves. McDowell thinks that this move is just as problematic because, on this view, our thoughts are not constrained by the world; in this way, we lose our grip on reality because it is as if, so to say, all there is to our empirical knowledge is our own projection of (what we think) the world (is like).⁷ If so, it is difficult to make sense of how our thoughts are grounded at all. Thus, to uphold the possibility of empirical knowledge, we need to have our causal contact with the world stand in a rational relation to our thoughts. If we nevertheless insist on causal explanations (e.g., by reducing conceptual responses to statistical patterns of functional signals), the contents of our thoughts *per se* cease to matter; this does away with the space of reasons altogether.⁸ Perhaps naturalists are willing to bite this bullet. However, insofar as we reject such reductionism, we ought to render intuitions normatively significant.

3

In his attempt to give a solution to this problem, McDowell rejects the naturalist move. In his view, when we make contact with the world, in our (outer) experiences, we are already

passively saddled with conceptual contents, drawing into operation capacities seamlessly integrated into a conceptual repertoire that [we employ] in the continuing activity of adjusting [our] world-view, so as to enable it to pass a scrutiny of its rational credentials.⁹

That is, in receiving the (causal) impacts from outside, McDowell argues, we are involuntarily using the capacities we use for what we ordinarily regard as conceptual activities such as making

⁶ Donald Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” *Epistemology: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., edited by Ernest Sosa, et al., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, 2008), 126.

⁷ McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture I, §6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

judgments.¹⁰ This view characterizes intuitions as being both conceptual and passive. By having conceptual contents, intuitions can stand in a rational relation to our thoughts; by being passive, intuitions can be distinguished from thoughts so that we avoid coherentism.

First, the contents of our intuitions are (construed to be) conceptual in the sense that our receptivity involves the same capacities we use for thinking in the space of reasons. That is, it is not the case that, in our reaction to impingements, sensing happens first through some (physical) mechanism independently of the apparatus with which we practice conceptual activities later on. Rather, such an apparatus is already employed in producing impressions of the world; the way we sense the world makes use of the resources for thinking. Hence, the contents of our intuitions include the very concepts at work in our thoughts, i.e., are subject to the same rules we follow in discursive activities. Thus, when I perceive that the necktie is green, it is not the case that things only look to me that way while the facts could be different, but rather that the necktie is really green as it appears to me under normal circumstances. If this is so, we can prove that our beliefs are correct, that our thoughts represent how things are, by appealing to our experiences; we may at times misjudge what we see, but this by no means implies severance from the world.

Second, our intuitions are passive in the sense that the employment of relevant conceptual capacities in our reaction to impingements is involuntary. In making judgments, we can choose which concepts to apply (as long as we follow the discursive rules). However, in sensing, we do not enjoy the same freedom; we cannot resist the specific ways objects strike us in our encounter with them. That is, we have no control over what we get to have in our view.¹¹ By characterizing intuitions as passive, McDowell avoids coherentism. If intuitions are conceptual, there is a worry

¹⁰ John McDowell, "Lecture II: The Logical Form of an Intuition," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol., 95, No. 9 (1998).

¹¹ McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture I, §5.

that they turn out to be a species of thoughts, in which case thoughts are left unconstrained. Yet, if we construe intuitions as passive, there is a sense in which we can differentiate intuitions from thoughts. We can cash out this notion by saying that the contents of intuitions are involuntarily saturated. Insofar as our perception of a green object is conceptual, it involves the same concept, viz., “green,” as in our thoughts. But this concept is saturated differently in intuition. Whereas “green” is saturated voluntarily in our thoughts as we can hold back from making this statement, the same concept is *involuntarily* saturated, or drawn, in our contact with the world (along with a whole battery of other concepts at our disposal when we encounter the object). Likewise, by taking intuitions as having involuntarily saturated contents, we can make sense of how the causal impacts from outside can ground our beliefs and judgments in the space of reasons.

Ginsborg gives two separate criticisms on this view, each targeting one of the two characteristics of McDowellian intuition introduced above. First, if intuitions are construed as conceptual, Ginsborg argues, we cannot account for how we acquire concepts in the first place.¹² Second, she contends that, if intuitions are passive, they cannot provide reasons for our beliefs.¹³ In §4, I will address the first criticism by explicating McDowell’s notion of “openness.” Then, by carefully analyzing her argument, I will show in §5 that, although the second criticism reveals that McDowell takes for granted the notion of openness, it provides no decisive objection against his view because the notion can be enriched in a way that overcomes Ginsborg’s criticism. In §6, I will suggest a way to enrich the notion of openness with other mental states.

¹² Hannah Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience,” *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 34, Issue 1/2 (2006): III.

¹³ Hannah Ginsborg, “Reasons for Belief,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (2006).

Ginsborg points out that, when one encounters, e.g., the necktie, one could go with different patterns of responses. For example, instead of *green* and *blue*, the subject may perceive the necktie in terms of *grue* and *bleen*; or, instead of natural light, he may take the store light as the *normal* circumstance (after observing that the necktie looks blue outside).¹⁴ The difference would be substantial, for different concepts involve different inferential relations and behavioral patterns. To say that the concepts (or rules) are empirical (i.e., bear on the features of the world), we must account for how the perceptual encounter itself guides the person to go with one pattern over the others. But we cannot do this by simply reciting that his experience is already saddled with the relevant concepts, that the person adopts “green” and “blue” because he sees it that way. McDowell needs to explain, Ginsborg charges, how that experience came to be saddled with the concepts in the first place. As Ginsborg notes, McDowell attempts to answer this question with the notion of second nature.¹⁵ McDowell suggests that, through a proper upbringing (such as learning a language), one picks up a certain pattern of responses (which occurs to the subject as conceptual once he is mature enough to recognize the responses as logically interrelated). In turn, the pattern becomes his *second* nature serving as a conceptual repertoire for both perception and discursive activities. The conceptual capacities attained in this way is not an enigmatic appendix to our non-conceptual responses to objects. Instead, they are the way our senses are shaped to receive (causal) impacts from outside. Thus, if a person is brought up in a linguistic community (or an environmental situation) for which perceiving in terms of green or natural light is more relevant than grue or store light (or cube than, so to say, sphube), he will (have) acquire(d) the

¹⁴ Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience,” 67-68.

¹⁵ McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture IV, §7; Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience,” 81-82.

appropriate concepts *in response to* the features of the world. In other words, the patterns *per se* immediately strike us as meaningful once our senses themselves are molded by and so imbued with certain concepts through our (linguistic) interactions with the world.

Yet, Ginsborg thinks this explanation comes short of meeting the demand, for the real question here is why one *should* go with one pattern of responses rather than another. Here, the problem is not to merely account for *how* one comes to acquire some concepts such as “green,” but *why* one *ought* to adopt “green” over “grue” (or revise his responses if he started off with “grue”). This is because, for our concepts to bear on the features of the world (so that our use of them is grounded in our intuitions), it cannot be up to us to apply whatever concept we happen to come up with. The world must dictate the formulation of our conceptual repertoire. Ginsborg thinks that the only way McDowell can salvage his view is by appealing to some inner workings of our conceptual capacities in figuring out which cue to go with. Thus, we may start with *grue*. But we come to correct ourselves, via inference, to subscribe to *green*. If this is indeed how one gets to adopt *green* over *grue* (thereby reshaping one’s propensity accordingly), the reason why he does so is because it results in more consistency among ideas (or in his use of words). Based on this speculation, Ginsborg argues that McDowell’s view falls back to coherentism.¹⁶

But this is not the route McDowell is taking. It is not the case for McDowell that mere external things just exert impacts on our senses, stimulating us to say “green” or “cube,” with such responses only to be reflected on later. On his view, our intuitions are an “openness to reality” in the sense that, in our contact with the world, things already come in as *green* and *cube*; and our intuitions are an openness or taking-in rather than our projection of ideas precisely

¹⁶ Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience,” 85-86; Davidson, 127.

because they are passive.¹⁷ In other words, having in our view the objects as already such and so is our natural way of interacting with the surroundings. Thus, although on our part we always experience the world, so to say, through the lens of a conceptual framework presupposed, the world is really as reported by our senses so long as the perceptions are made under normal circumstances. This is because, insofar as intuitions are passive, the conceptual patterns according to which our senses react to the surroundings are to be understood as the world forcing itself upon and making its own way into our minds as if the patterns are “evoked or wrung from the perceiver by the object[s]” themselves.¹⁸ McDowell’s appeal to second nature is accordingly innocent of committing (a version of) coherentism in explaining how we acquire concepts.

But then how do we know that (the reports made by) our senses so construed correspond with reality? In other words, how can we tell whether the way we are open to the world (i.e., the conceptual framework according to which we receive the causal impacts) is not itself deceiving? If we cannot assure this, how can we appeal to our intuitions in justifying our beliefs? This is the worry at the heart of skepticism, and addressing it requires a “sideways-on picture” of the world and our conceptual outlook, the disinterested point of view from which we can observe and judge whether the way we interact with our surroundings is indeed correct; the motivation behind this idea is that we want to avoid circular explanations by assessing (our acquisition of) the concepts, through which we receive causal impacts, without using those concepts themselves. Ginsborg criticizes McDowell’s view for failing to appreciate this picture.¹⁹ It is true that McDowell does

¹⁷ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 26.

¹⁸ Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, originally published in 1956 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), §16; McDowell, “Lecture II: The Logical Form of an Intuition.”

¹⁹ Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience,” 85-91.

dismiss the need for one.²⁰ But the dialectic structure of their arguments is misleading because Ginsborg's accusation is based on a dubious picture of our conceptual outlook.

Ginsborg thinks that a sideways-on picture must explain our (acquisition of) concepts in terms of non-conceptual "guidance" from outside for the following reason that:

[We] cannot acquire the relevant conceptual capacities, even with training in the use of language, unless there is something given to [us] in sensation which [we] can recognize as correlating with the use of words [we are] learning, and which thus serves as a cue or guide to the appropriate use of those words [or concepts].²¹

Such a picture would be possible only if we could purify the contents of our perception down to something unaffected by the ways we interact with the world (through cultures, languages, or psychological states). The need for such contents arises only if by 'objectivity' we aspire to mean something that lies outside the realm of thoughts; the idea is that we can assure whether our patterns of responses bear on the features of the world only by occupying the standpoint at which we can grasp the characteristics of objects and their impingements on us without using or presupposing any conceptual framework. This approach is analogous to non-cognitivism, which takes our moral outlook to be extraneous to the theoretical image of the world; but in the case of our discourse the juxtaposition is between conceptual and non-conceptual. Thus, the objection comes down to insisting on construing our conceptual frameworks as applying discursive rules to non-conceptual intakes or cues just as, it is supposed, we *should* explain virtue as applying moral principles to theoretical images. Despite its appeal, McDowell finds this view prejudiced:

We are inclined to think there ought to be a neutral external standpoint from which the rationality of any genuine exercise of reason could be demonstrated ... However, it is highly implausible that all the concerns that motivate virtuous actions are intelligible, one by one, independently of appreciating a virtuous person's distinctive way of seeing

²⁰ McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture II, §5; Afterword, Part II, §2.

²¹ Ginsborg, "Kant and the Problem of Experience," 89.

situations ... It is, rather, to comprehend, essentially from within, the virtuous person's distinctive way of viewing particular situations.²²

When a person sees a situation as that in which he ought to help the poor, he is not perceiving it apart from his intention to behave morally. Rather, the situation strikes the subject as in itself calling for an appropriate action. That is, the virtuous person's moral outlook is the way he *sees* his surroundings. Thus, we need not posit any independent prior image or outlook to account for the reason by which we judge one (set of) action(s) as more appropriate to the situation than another. By the same token, we do not need an external or transcendental perspective to account for why we should adopt one set of concepts (or pattern of responses) over another.

I am not disputing the need for a sideways-on picture without which it is difficult for us to avoid circular explanations. Unlike McDowell, I think that vindicating a moral or conceptual framework requires more than asking, "Don't you see?"²³ Nor am I denying the independence of reality from our intentions or dispositions; the features of the world may remain constant or stay unaltered in our contact with them. What I challenge is the notion of objectivity Ginsborg seems to presuppose. Whatever standpoint we take, it is still *our* point of view, and only from a certain conceptual outlook can we capture the characteristics of the cues we take on. So I am doubtful that there could be any sense in which we can grasp the contents of our intuitions outside the space of reasons and, if there could be such an outlook at least in a negative sense, whether it would have any explanatory merit; for instance, in characterizing our intuition of green as light of a certain wavelength exerting an impact on us which is correlated with our thought of green, we are already taking up a conceptual framework, in which we *see* the object in terms of that

²² John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), §6b.

²³ John McDowell, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following," *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 211.

wavelength (perhaps with the help of a computer-generated graph). After all, adopting a conceptual outlook is itself assuming the disinterested point of view, for to read concepts into the objects of our perception is to conceive ourselves as capable of identifying patterns and rules in nature; to see things as such and so is to respond to certain features as the principles or governing forces behind a class of particular instances. Hence, objectivity is integral to and discernible only within the space of reasons. That we should assess our concepts without succumbing to circular use does not mean that we should stand outside the conceptual realm entirely; we could devise a conceptual framework of a higher order to make evaluations *from a distance*. Likewise, although I agree with Ginsborg on the indispensability of a sideways-on picture, I am suspicious of her depiction of what it is for us to have and acquire a conceptual outlook on the world.

5

McDowell's account of concept acquisition likewise heavily depends on our intuitions being passive, and Ginsborg argues that intuitions so construed cannot justify or serve as reasons for our beliefs. Ginsborg and McDowell both agree that what it means for our (visual) intuitions to be passive is that we may see (or be perceptually presented with) something (e.g., feature, episode, state of affairs, etc.) without believing it or accepting it as a fact.²⁴ As elaborated above, McDowell needs there to be passivity (involuntary saturation of concepts) in our interaction with the world in order to avoid coherentism. In this way, he believes, we can secure the idea that our thoughts are constrained from without. But this commitment, Ginsborg thinks, begs the question. According to Ginsborg, McDowell seeks to legitimize this commitment by contending that it is the only way to explain the case of a bogus illusion in which a person "withholds assent from a

²⁴ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 11; Ginsborg, "Reasons for Belief," 294-295.

veridical appearance” because he falsely believes his senses are compromised only to realize later that he had it right all along.²⁵ The person in doubt is arguably (perceptually) presented with the same content before and after his repentance. He initially refrains from judging, e.g., that the necktie is green, but later comes to accept it as a fact. In support of his new belief, the person would appeal to the presentation of the fact, which is common to both cases. McDowell thinks the only way to make sense of this phenomenon is by conceding that, in our perception, there is a kind of content we can be in possession of, the truth of which is yet to be judged (by us).

Ginsborg makes an important distinction here. She points out that what the subject cites as his evidence or reason for his belief is not the fact that he sees a green necktie, but the fact that the necktie is green.²⁶ The perceptual representation is appealed to only as the channel through which we have access to this fact. She then asks whether it is really possible for one to cite a fact as a reason without believing it as well.²⁷ Although the person in a bogus illusion is having a veridical experience, it does not strike him as representing the fact because he does not accept it as so. If the person does not assent to what the visual content he is presented with indicates, then he is not counting it as evidence for anything. For him, such an intuition is not a case of seeing, but of mere *looking*. It seems then that what our intuitions represent to us can serve as reasons for our beliefs only if we have in some sense already accepted them in. Ginsborg foresees that McDowell may complain about this way of characterizing what it means for intuitions to provide us with what serve as reasons.²⁸ McDowell would object to it by arguing that, in our openness to reality, facts become *available* to us, and we can come back to and cite them whenever we want

²⁵ Ginsborg, “Reasons for Belief,” 294-295, 298.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 301-302.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 304-305.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 305-315.

to; yet, this does not mean that we must have already made up our mind about them. That is, although the subject might not at first have assented to his intuition, he can appeal to it whenever he gains self-confidence because his experiential intake has rendered the fact (conceptually) ready for him (even if his realization itself may have been reached inferentially²⁹).

There are however difficult cases for McDowell. What if the subject is caused by the green necktie to have a hallucination of a green necktie which is subjectively indistinguishable from actually seeing one? Or, what if the subject is caused by a façade of a green necktie next to a real green necktie to think that there is a green necktie before him? McDowell does not count these cases as experiencing or seeing because they are “doxastically irresponsible” in the sense that the subject has no sufficient reason to believe he saw a green necktie.³⁰ What is then the difference between these cases and that of a bogus illusion? In the case of a bogus illusion, we would say, the subject is really *seeing* the green necktie. Compare this to another case Ginsborg gives in which the green necktie is in the subject’s (visual) vicinity while it is never noticed.³¹ (This is very similar to the case of a façade because, in both cases, the necktie goes unnoticed.) Why can this not be a case of seeing if the unnoticed necktie in the scene is factually identical with what the subject is visually presented with in the case of a bogus illusion? In both cases, it could be argued that the subject is equally *open* to the reality in which the green necktie is found. Ginsborg suspects that this consideration reveals a circularity in McDowell’s account:

[McDowell] appeal[s] to his conception of experience as openness to reality in order to defend the view that experience can provide reasons for belief ... [But] this conception of experience appears to depend for its intelligibility on the possibility of experience’s

²⁹ That the subject can often make judgments based on something other than intuitions, viz., reasoning, does not imply coherentism. To avoid coherentism, one need not contend that *only* intuitions justify our beliefs. Rather, one needs only to have our inferences come in (rational) contact with the world via intuitions.

³⁰ Ibid., 313-314.

³¹ Ibid., 308-309.

yielding reasons for belief. This emerges when we ask under what circumstances a subject counts ... as being open to, or taking in that, or indeed just seeing that *p*.³²

Her point is that, in determining which case counts as the case of being open to reality, the subject must have a good reason why certain impressions serve as evidence while others do not; so it would be begging the question if we take only certain impressions to be serving as evidence or reasons by appealing to the idea that our experiences are openness to reality.

This criticism shows that McDowell takes for granted the notion of openness in distinguishing between the cases of experiencing and the pseudo-cases. In evaluating the case of a bogus illusion, we already know independently of the perceiver's testimony that the necktie referred to by him is (and has all along been) green, thus that the cause of his (mis)perception is *this* necktie; this information is however inaccessible by the subject himself. So, if McDowell insists that what distinguishes genuine cases is the fact that the subject's impression is caused by the actual states of affairs under normal circumstances, we are failing to count in the subject's own reasons. That the subject is seeing a green necktie is something *we* read into his responses. But it would be a logical leap if we attribute this awareness to the subject, citing as evidence for openness *our* prescience that *his* impressions are good source materials. So the challenge is to establish openness from within a standpoint (i.e., from the subject's own point of view). Yet there is no way to do this without begging the question *unless* we reject the idea that the subject is just as well open to reality when he is distracted from the green necktie. To counter Ginsborg's criticism, we should then enrich the notion of openness from within a standpoint in such a way that we can dismiss the case of a distraction. Intuitively, we would like to say that, in the case of a distraction, the subject is *not* open to the relevant parts of the reality, that the information about

³² *Ibid.*, 313.

the color (or presence) of the necktie failed to make itself visually available to him; in the case of a bogus illusion, we find ourselves in favor of the view that the relevant information was at the subject's disposal. I believe there is a sense in which this inclination can be defended.

We can hypothesize that the perceptual content under *and* free of a bogus illusion are the same (or continuous) whereas the content of a distracted perception and that of a concentrated one are not. If intuitions draw in our conceptual repertoire, which is formulated or shaped by our oriented interactions with our surroundings, our *seeing* must involve more than being in the presence of objects in vicinity. Among its components, other than the light waves stimulating optic nerves, may be other mental states such as attention and interest. If this outline is on the right track, it moves the battle elsewhere. Indeed, McDowell's view (at least as it is reconstructed here) is missing a satisfactory account of openness. However, it would be a non-sequitur to conclude that his view is false from this defect alone since we have not yet considered all the ways McDowell could account for openness. Admittedly, if it eventually turns out that we cannot supplement his view with an account which is theoretically enriching and not merely ad hoc, we should renounce it once and for all. Until then, I would like to maintain that we should search for a plausible interpretation of McDowell's perceptual conceptualism, for the search for a view that can avoid coherentism without succumbing to skepticism should not be given up lightly.

6

In this section, I will briefly discuss how we might overcome McDowell's oversight by (roughly) sketching out a candidate account of openness. As I speculated above, our *seeing* may involve some cognitive or intentional state. For instance, what makes its way into (or leaves a mark on) our minds may depend on what we are interested in doing at a particular moment. If we

seek to help others, then certain features in the scene (such as the number of hairs which a person who needs help has) may not be taken in; or, if we are only trying to identify hues, shades may not leave any impression on us unless we shift our interests. Likewise, when we are distracted, only the features that are (or that we expect to be) relevant to our interests come in contact with our mind. That features *can be* presented to us in the space of reasons does not entail that they have to be so *all the time* (which would be quite an inefficient way for our cognition to work: we can process, or synthesize, only so much information at a time). In other words, that our intuitions *open* reality to us (i.e., provide us with materials for thoughts) does not mean that they have to open all features to us at all times.³³ The worry here might be that this threatens to make perception less passive. But this concern can be addressed. Our cognitive or intentional states do not affect what it is possible for us to perceive; (the shifts in) our interests only direct us to certain parts of reality, and what we take in is still constrained by the world, because we cannot control the contents given by intuitions. In this sense, we remain open to the world.

We may work out this approach by considering what it takes for us to have concepts. As Ginsborg notes as well, concepts involve the ability to categorize things—to react to properties or objects, not merely as what stimulate one to behave in some ways, but as what persist through or are regulative in a series of particular situations; the subject must have a sense of what belongs with what.³⁴ It is in this sense of seeing things *as such* that there are correct (and incorrect) ways of responding to them. To have concepts is likewise to perceive things, as Ginsborg puts it, with

³³ A perceptive person may have a broader range of openness than others; such a person could become aware of features of different contexts and interests at the same time. A compulsive (or akratic) person could have some interests override others (by failing to turn off certain *voices*), which results in confounding perceptual contents. Likewise, the range and quality of openness can vary among people.

³⁴ Hannah Ginsborg, "Empirical Concepts and the Content of Experience," *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, (2006): §3.

the awareness that there are ways “in which [we] *ought* to perceive” them.³⁵ In other words, to assume a conceptual standpoint is to take a normative attitude towards our impressions. In taking this attitude, we need not yet be in possession of any specific concept, or rule for discriminating what we see. Rather, the mere intention to conform to some rules is sufficient. Such an intention, I would like to point out, arises in respect to our practical needs as solving problems requires a protocol to follow. That is, meeting our needs induces a normative distinction, between the right things (i.e., those which meet the needs) and the wrong things (i.e., those which do not). Thus, in becoming aware of our needs, we take up the stance (towards the objects of our perception) that there are ways to organize or manipulate things in relation to one another for certain purposes in interest. Likewise, if concepts involve the intention to follow rules, which in turn emerges from and within the context of our need to settle issues, there is a sense in which we can articulate the idea that one of the determining factors in our openness to reality must be our interests, i.e., how we conceptually interact with facts involves what we are interested in doing at a moment.³⁶

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 359.

³⁶ There are many concepts and notions to be worked out in this approach. For instance, the notion of normative attitude and its relation to the rule-following intention must be polished. An account of how the subject decides on a specific rule to follow should be given as well. Also, a distinction between interest and need may be drawn to better explain the dynamics underlying our normative attitude. These topics are beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, I hope to have shown that this is one way of enriching the notion of openness that is worth developing.

Reference

- Davidson, Donald. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." *Epistemology: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., edited by Ernest Sosa, et al., Ch. 11. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, 2008.
- Fodor, Jerry A. *Hume Variation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Ginsborg, Hannah. "Empirical Concepts and the Content of Experience," *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 14, Issue 3 (2006): 349-372.
- , "Kant and the Problem of Experience." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 34, Issue 1/2 (2006): 59-106
- , "Reasons for Belief." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (2006): 206-318.
- Gupta, Anil. *Conscious Experience: A Logical Inquiry*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019.
- McDowell, John. "Lecture II: The Logical Form of an Intuition." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 95, No. 9. (1998): 451-470.
- . "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following." *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 198-218. Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1998.
- . *Mind and World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, 1996.
- . "Virtue and Reason." *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 50-73. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Sellars, Wilfrid. "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," originally published in 1956. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.