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Santiago Echeverri

## Epistemic Responsibility and Perceptual Experience

In the last few years, some philosophers have insisted that an adequate account of knowledge should conceive of subjects as responsible beings. Epistemic responsibility is usually related to the capacity to engage in adequate policies in the search of truth, the ability to give reasons, or the readiness to revise one's beliefs in the light of new evidence. These ideas are in line with the complaint that a crude externalism about knowledge cannot be right.<sup>1</sup>

If one assumes that perceptual experience offers a primary source of knowledge, the above requirement takes the form of three questions: how do subjects manage to maintain an optimal epistemic position in their perceptual contact with the world? how do they exploit experience in their reason-giving practices? how do they manage to revise their beliefs in the light of experience?

John McDowell and Bill Brewer, among others, have sketched a picture of perceptual content that is intended to elucidate these questions. Their picture is based on the hypothesis that perceptual awareness consists in a pre-doxastic actualization of conceptual abilities. Given its conceptual character, perceptual content would be easily integrated in belief systems and subjects would have direct access to it. Since these conditions are necessary for justification and belief revision to be possible, their picture would secure two necessary conditions of empirical rationality.

In this paper I will argue that the conceptualist hypothesis is wrong. Positing a pre-doxastic actualization of concepts cannot solve these problems. I will rather argue that a doxastic account of experience provides a better model of first person accessibility. Before I reach this conclusion, it is necessary to introduce the conceptualist program.<sup>2</sup>

### I

Conceptualists think that there is a legitimate idea of empirical rationality that characterizes human perceptual contact with the world. To count as knowers or epistemic subjects, it is not sufficient to be immediately related to the world or enjoy reliable perceptual mechanisms. It is also necessary to be bound by epistemic norms. In his critique of causal theories of perception, McDowell famously wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> See Fred Dretske, "Entitlement: Epistemic Rights without Epistemic Duties?", in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (2000), pp. 591-606.

<sup>2</sup> I develop some of these points elsewhere. See "McDowell's Conceptualist Therapy for Skepticism", in: *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming) and "The Myth of the Conceptual Given" (under submission).

[P]erhaps this picture secures that we cannot be blamed for what happens at that outer boundary [of the space of reasons], and hence that we cannot be blamed for the inward influence of what happens there. What happens there is the result of an alien force, the causal impact of the world, operating outside the control of our spontaneity. 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.<sup>3</sup>

McDowell's sketchy remarks can be interpreted in different ways but the main idea is clear. Any account of perceptual experience should make room for a conception of humans as responsible agents. In other words, any theory should satisfy Quine's idea that experience is a tribunal of beliefs or Sellars's claim that empirical knowledge "is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy..."<sup>4</sup> In less metaphorical terms, subjects of experience are rational to the extent that they are able to justify and revise their beliefs in the light of experience.

Content conceptualism is based on the claim that, in order to make sense of experience as a tribunal (or as a self-correcting enterprise), we have to conceive of perceptual content as conceptual. This is apparent when McDowell urges "a different notion of givenness, one that is innocent of the confusion between justification and exculpation".<sup>5</sup> Since perceptions are passive, however, this proposal seems puzzling. Why should one claim that conceiving of perceptual content as conceptual is necessary to make room for epistemic responsibility? If I cannot decide how things *ought to* look in perception, but they merely look a particular way, how could content conceptualism make room for responsibility? If perceptions belong to the sorts of things that merely "happen" to us and there is nothing I can do to change the way things look, is it not a category mistake to reject a theory of perceptual content on the ground that it offers exculpations?

Suppose I close my eyes and walk to the window of my room. When I arrive there, I open my eyes and begin to see things I did not foresee: I see a rainy day, my neighbor walking with his dog, and the postman arriving with the mail. In some sense my perceiving these contents is *passive*; even though it was *my* decision to walk to the window and open my eyes, their appearing happened to me in an *involuntary* way. If experiences are involuntary, we are faced with a problem: conceptual or non-conceptual, they are not the sorts of things to which the category of responsibility seems to apply.

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<sup>3</sup> See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> See Willard van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 20-46; Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), § 38, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 10.

These remarks suggest a different interpretation. The link between perceptual content and responsibility should be indirect. The contribution of conceptual contents in the whole project is not to explain epistemic responsibility *directly* but to provide necessary conditions thereof. I can think of two necessary conditions.

The first condition can be formulated by contrasting conceptualism with a picture where there is a clear-cut difference between the content of perception and the content of judgment, as occurs in some versions of non-conceptual content or rough impressions. If these contents are totally different from the contents of beliefs, one is faced with what one could term the “integration problem.” If beliefs are conceptual states, introducing a non-conceptual “given” will create a gap between perceiving and believing. If there is a gap, it is hard to see how beliefs can be justified or revised in the light of experience. The defender of non-conceptual content is then led to introduce a transformation process by means of which non-conceptual contents become conceptual. If they were already conceptual, however, the gap would presumably disappear. Since justification and revision cannot take place if there is a gap, eliminating the gap is a necessary condition thereof.<sup>6</sup>

Second, one could justify the hypothesis of perceptual content as conceptual by saying that it makes contents *accessible* to the subject. Given that one cannot rationally justify or revise a content one has no access to, that content must be accessible to the mind if it is to figure in these activities. Since concepts are usually endowed with the property of being accessible, describing perceptual content as conceptual would provide the second step in the program of conceiving experience as a tribunal. This reading can be sustained through the conceptualist idea that concepts are tied to the capacity of reflection and freedom.<sup>7</sup> The idea of freedom suggests that humans can *contemplate* different alternatives and *choose* among different possible courses of action.<sup>8</sup> One cannot, however, choose an alternative unless one has access to it. Hence, if one takes these alternatives as conceptually articulated, one will have satisfied a second condition of epistemic responsibility.

## II

Conceptualists have provided two different versions of the claim that perceptual experiences are conceptually articulated. Both can be classified as *pre-doxastic*. According to them, we need a distinction between conscious perceptual states and belief states. In the former case,

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<sup>6</sup> See Sonia Sedivy, “Nonconceptual Epicycles”, in: Christine van Geen and Frédérique de Vignemont (eds.) *European Review of Philosophy* 6 (2006), pp. 31-64. See also: J. McDowell, “Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality”, in: *Journal of Philosophy* 95 (1998), p. 462.

<sup>7</sup> See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 47; Bill Brewer, *Perception and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 118, 153, p. 164, etc.

<sup>8</sup> See J. McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, in his *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 171-172.

concepts are passively (or involuntarily) actualized. In the latter, they are part of cognitive attitudes like judgment or belief.

Let us call the first version “propositional conceptualism.” According to this version, experiences present structured contents like those introduced by a “that”-clause preceded by a cognitive verb. In the transition from perception to belief, the subject “endorses” or “takes” these contents at face value.

The second view can be called “intuitive conceptualism.” The main idea, which can be traced back to Kant, is that perception delivers contents that have a “formal unity.” Although these contents lack propositional structure of the form “*a is F*,” McDowell hypothesizes that they deliver concepts of proper and common sensibles. In the case of vision, they would include “postures such as perching and modes of locomotion such as hopping or flying.”<sup>9</sup>

How do these conceptions of experience make room for epistemic responsibility? How do they help us to clarify the capacity to justify and correct our beliefs in the light of experience? In what follows, I shall criticize the motivations for a pre-doxastic form of awareness.

**Integration problem.** As I pointed out before, the integration problem is particularly vivid for any picture of non-conceptual content. One might ask, however, whether one can solve it by endorsing a form of pre-doxastic conceptualism. The response is negative.

The conceptualist claims that we have to conceive of perceptual contents as conceptually structured, as this would avoid the postulation of a cognitive transformation from a non-conceptual content to a conceptual one. Such a move, however, only pushes the integration issue a little bit further, without solving it. After all, it is possible to distinguish between a time  $t_1$  when an item is not being highlighted and a time  $t_2$  when the same item comes to be singled out as the object of one’s selective attention. It seems natural to conceive of this transition as a conceptualization process: at  $t_1$  the subject was not actualizing any concept in relation to the relevant item, contrary to what happened when she directed her attention to the item at  $t_2$ , and recognized it, say, as an *F*. If that’s right, this shows that the integration problem is a problem for any theory.

This difficulty is even more vivid if one endorses a version of intuitive conceptualism. If one accepts McDowell’s idea that perceptual experience delivers contents of proper and common sensibles, the integration problem still asks for a solution. After all, justification and revision in the light of experience involve more specific concepts, like *bird*, *canary*, *Pierre* or *dog*. If one wants to explain the way a subject can justify or correct perceptual judgments involving these specific concepts, one still needs a transformation model. Hence, it is not by taking the

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<sup>9</sup> See J. McDowell, “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”, in: Jakob Lindgaard (ed.) *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 5.

content of perception as conceptually articulated that the problem will be solved. The level of conceptualization must also be capable of “rational interaction” with the concepts exercised in judgment and belief.

**Accessibility condition.** The second argument for the conceptualist proposal was based on the intuitive connection between accessibility and responsibility. As far as I can see, it rests on the following assumption:

**A1.** Responsibility-accessibility connection: I cannot be held responsible for what I have no reflective access to.

In what follows, I shall try to show that we should weaken this assumption. Once we weaken it, however, the motivations for pre-doxastic conceptualism vanish.

A1 owes its plausibility to a topographical metaphor: there is a line that separates what is accessible to us from what is not accessible to us. If something is absent from the territory one has access to, one cannot be held responsible for what occurs there. As McDowell tells us, he wants “an analogue to the sense in which if someone is found in a place from which she has been banished, she is exculpated by the fact that she was deposited there by a tornado. Her arriving there is completely removed from the domain of what she is responsible for.”<sup>10</sup>

A moment's reflection suggests that this assumption is not trivially true. What does count as part of the domain of what one is responsible for? Is that domain merely constituted by that to which one has direct or immediate access? Or does it also include that to which one has *indirect* or *potential* access? When one reads McDowell's intuition in this weaker sense, pre-doxastic conceptualism loses its intuitive force.

Consider a case from practical reason. A man is at home watching TV while his 2-year-old nephew is playing in the park. Suppose his nephew has an accident during this time. Since the man has promised his sister to baby-sit, he can be held responsible for the accident, even though he has no direct access to what happened in the park. This example allows us to weaken the link between accessibility and responsibility. The man's responsibility is related to the fact that he *could have* avoided the accident by surveying the child. To be sure, direct accessibility enables us to act accordingly, but one is not only responsible for what one has direct access to. On many occasions, one is also responsible for what one *could have had* access to.

This weakening of the principle can be used against the conceptualist. Consider a picture of experience where subjects have no direct access to the pre-doxastic deliverances of perception but only enjoy reflective access to their perceptual beliefs. When the subject is concerned to

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<sup>10</sup> See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 8 fn 7.

evaluate her own experiences, she merely has access to her perceptual beliefs. There is no reason to think that this picture would preclude the ascription of responsibility to the subject. Even if she does not have direct access to the perceptual processes that mediate her access to the world, she can still adopt adequate policies to remain in an optimal epistemic position. She can attempt to remain under normal lighting conditions when she is judging the color of an object, or keep an adequate perspective when she is trying to identify an object.

This point can be made vivid by reflecting on the following point: there are many unknown facts that mediate our relation to the world. Just think of the complex patterns of neuron firing that mediate our visual awareness. Despite our ignorance of such matters, their existence does not preclude our taking adequate epistemic policies. Now, since any picture has to rely on the obtaining of facts one is not acquainted with, there is some room for maneuver in drawing the accessible-inaccessible divide in a different way. There is no reason to assume that one should have *direct* access to the pre-doxastic content of perception (as opposed to the content of belief) in order to be held responsible for those contents.

### III

I have been arguing that conceptualism is ill-motivated. Conceiving of the content of experience as conceptual is neither sufficient to solve the integration problem nor necessary to preserve the link between accessibility and responsibility. In this section, I will focus on the accessibility requirement and will argue that pre-doxastic conceptualism does not provide an adequate model thereof.

We can illustrate the conceptualist strategy by focusing on the phenomenon of the persistence of illusion. In the Müller-Lyer figures, two lines appear to be of different length. If, however, a naïve subject were told that it is an optical illusion, he might be capable of *withholding* his previous judgment that one line is longer than the other. According to the conceptualist analysis, this capacity to withhold judging is easily explained in a pre-doxastic account of the content of experiences. Since perceiving is not mere believing, the subject is in principle *free* not to endorse the experiential contents presented in experience, even though, in ordinary contexts, he endorses them by default. His capacity to withhold judgment, however, depends on the fact that the contents he withholds are accessible to first person reflection. This is possible once you grant that the contents of experience are, albeit belief-independent, conceptually articulated.<sup>11</sup>

As far as I can see, this analysis rests upon two assumptions:

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<sup>11</sup> See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 11 and fn 9.

**A2.** Disconnection assumption: only a theory that dissociates perceptual awareness from judgment or belief can preserve epistemic responsibility.

**A3.** Conceptual sufficiency: the actualization of conceptual capacities is sufficient to make perceptual contents accessible and, therefore, to motivate belief revision.

Let us take a look at A2. Is it really necessary to *dissociate* perceptual awareness from belief in order to preserve epistemic responsibility? I do not think so. The case of the persistence of illusion is so construed that it does not justify the claim that experience is belief-independent. After all, the case is naturally described as an example of *withholding* judgment: someone who has already taken the two lines to be of different length can withhold (or suppress) her impulse to take them as being of different length.<sup>12</sup> What is needed is not to *disconnect* belief states from perceptual experiences but to account for the subject's capacity to *control* her disposition to take appearances at face value. As far as I know, however, the conceptualist has provided no explanation of this capacity.

The case parallels the human capacity to fast or to go on a diet. When one is hungry, one is naturally disposed to eat. In order to explain the capacity to fast, we need an account of the mechanisms that allow people to control their disposition to eat. It would, however, be a mistake to factorize the state of being hungry into two components: a feeling of hunger and a disposition to eat. By parity of reasoning, it is a mistake to factorize perceptual awareness into a pre-doxastic conceptual state and an endorsement component just because humans are able to withhold their tendency to believe.

Let us examine A3. Is the actualization of conceptual capacities sufficient to make perceptual contents accessible? To be sure, concepts are usually related to the notions of consciousness and first person access. That is why some people have introduced non-conceptual contents as serving sub-personal mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, one can ask what it means to have a *pre-doxastic access* to the content of experience. In what follows, I will criticize the underlying picture.

Here is my first argument: if you grant a version of intuitive conceptualism, it is not clear that the content it hypothesizes is really available to first person experience. After all, the idea that perceptual experiences deliver concepts of proper and common sensibles must be seen as a theoretical hypothesis, not as a description of the way we experience the world. To illustrate

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<sup>12</sup> See George Pitcher, *A Theory of Perception* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) and, more recently, A. D. Smith, "Perception and Belief", in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (2001), pp. 283-309.

<sup>13</sup> See José Luis Bermúdez, *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998). Not all philosophers accept this analysis. Peacocke takes it that non-conceptual content is *accessible*. See Christopher Peacocke, "Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?", in: *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2001), pp. 239-264.



the point, imagine you ask people in the street what they see. They would probably mention chairs, mountains, lakes, animals, etc. They would not, however, mention concepts of proper or common sensibles. Now, if you suspect that people do not know what appears to them, try to ask a philosopher of perception. Moore and Russell would tell you that we see sense data and, some years ago, McDowell would have replied that we see facts. It would be odd to claim that they are only aware of concepts of proper and common sensibles, and that they still do not know of what they are aware.

My second argument is more general. It is contentious to assume that our access to perceptual contents can be *wholly* explained in terms of the actualization of concepts. Actually, if one is interested in explaining first person access, one also has to clarify the *attitudes* involved. A moment's reflection suggests that these attitudes are very much like doxastic attitudes. Let us consider one of the main epistemic uses of accessibility: its role in the critical evaluation of mental states.

One might be tempted to compare the critical evaluation of ideas to a visual scene: we write the ideas on a piece of paper and compare them with each other. With this metaphor in mind, one may be inclined to think that *there is something* that makes percepts open to scrutiny. Perhaps one thinks of concepts as lenses one uses when examining a given item. If I do not wear those lenses, the items remain inaccessible to me; but, if I wear them, they are disclosed to me.

Nonetheless, one might argue that this model of accessibility has a flavor of the Given. After all, scrutinizing one's ideas is an *epistemic activity* that involves judgment. Suppose that I plan to go on vacation. Before going to the airport, I have to solve a number of tasks. In order not to forget anything, I write down everything on a sheet of paper: (1) close the windows; (2) turn the alarm on; (3) hand the keys to the janitor, etc. The rational process of checking the things I have already done would probably consist in putting a cross in front of the performed task. *Checking* '1' would be similar to *asserting* "I already closed the windows." Although perception is involved, examining the list is not something "given" by perception, but requires that I keep track of the tasks I have already performed and those still pending. In this model, it is by *acting in a particular way* that I can examine the different things. Even if one grants that having a concept is similar to wearing an appropriate lens, the crucial point is that using it involves operations that are hard to sever from those of judging.

When one considers this analogy in the light of the problem of epistemic responsibility, it appears plausible. Suppose that you are requested to examine a logical proof of a theorem and decide whether it follows from the axioms. Simply observing the sequence of lines will not

do. You need to *check* whether each line contains a well-formed formula and *follows* from the axioms. Consequently, you have to *accept* the previous theorems (at least for the sake of the argument). In order to deduce  $q$  from  $p \wedge q$  you have to *judge* (or *suppose*) that  $p \wedge q$ . In this model, examination is a complex activity constituted by *doings*. That is why a subject can be held responsible for her verdict on the validity of the proof.

The trouble with a pre-doxastic model is that it is difficult to see how concepts *themselves* can provide the subject with a responsible access to perceptual intake. Either one thinks of access by means of a perceptual model or one posits a new psychological process that does not rely on judgment. Since conceptualists have not explained what a pre-judgmental access to content is, we are left with an imagery reminiscent of the Given. There is a conceptual Given that has the magic property of “opening our eyes” to the layout of reality.

The dialectic strategy should be clear. I have been trying to explain how the idea of pre-doxastic actualizations of concepts could account for epistemic responsibility. I have argued that conceiving of concepts as actualized in perceptual experience is not sufficient to solve the integration problem, and it provides an inadequate model of accessibility. In the final section, I sketch an alternative picture of experience that fares better with these objections.

#### IV

In my view, ordinary experience can be seen as a form of believing. Contrary to classical versions of the doxastic theory, however, my view is not that experience can be analyzed or reduced to the acquisition of beliefs. The claim is subtler. As I see them, perceptual processes occur unconsciously. These processes can have non-conceptual contents of the sorts studied by cognitive science but these contents are *functionally connected* to other processes in the biological (not functionalist) sense of the term. In some cases, these processes can give rise to reflexes, as when a ball is coming at you and you automatically duck your head. In other cases, perceptual processes can guide action without producing an adequate feeling of presence. This is usually the case with those blind-sighted patients who display fine-tuned grasping abilities in the absence of the phenomenology characteristic of ordinary experience. In other cases, perceptual processes are functionally related to belief states. Fixating belief is the paradigmatic way in which perceptual processes give rise to perceptual awareness, and it is also the way in which they fulfill their epistemic function. This captures Davidson's claim that perceptual awareness is just another belief.<sup>14</sup> Perceptual beliefs can be introduced as reasons for other beliefs but they are not rationally or evidentially based. Instead, they are functionally linked to lower level perceptual processes.

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<sup>14</sup> See Donald Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 142.

Since this is a teleological analysis, it entails that, *only* under *normal* circumstances, subjects believe what they see. As a result, it would be wrong to reject it by arguing that *some* experiences do not lead to belief. This line of reply would be mistaken, since functions can fail to be fulfilled. A thermometer can fail to indicate the temperature and an unhealthy heart can fail to pump blood. It remains uncontroversial, however, that the function of thermometers is to indicate the temperature and that of hearts is to pump blood. These examples show that human perception-belief transitions are normative. When perceptual processes work properly, the subject is led to form appropriate beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

This model can be extended to the persistence of illusion. Although the proper function of perceptual processes is to give rise to perceptual belief, it is not necessary that *all* perceptual processes end up with endorsement. In this perspective, well-known perceptual illusions are examples of malfunctioning in a broad sense. To be sure, when one line looks longer than the other in the Müller-Lyer illusion, there is a sense in which one's perceptual system is not damaged but is working properly but there is also a sense in which the context of belief fixation is abnormal. Whenever there is a withholding of judgment, it is owed to the presence of a background belief that *blocks* the normal belief formation process. It is, however, arguable that perceptual systems acquired the functions they have in contexts in which such undermining reasons were absent. If those mechanisms were selected to help organisms to acquire knowledge from their environment, the most "natural" solution would be to connect these perceptual mechanisms directly to endorsement. From this perspective, it always takes a second thought to withhold a perceptual belief.

In the present case, it is this doxastic level that is crucial for making sense of the epistemic role of experience. Perceptual experience is entitling only when there are no reasons to cast doubt on it. In the absence of reasons to wonder whether the two lines are of the same length, a naïve subject is entitled to believe that they are of the same length. On this account, "being entitled to *p*" is not factive. It is a defeasible state. Being in that state would allow the subject to be exculpated if he were wrong.<sup>16</sup>

This model, however, also provides some keys to incorporate epistemic responsibility. In what follows, I will mention some intuitive requirements of epistemic justification and revision, and will explain how the present model accommodates them.

**Transparency:** the first requirement is that perceptual experience should be conceived as transparent and not as an epistemic intermediary between mind and world. It is only because

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<sup>15</sup> In future research, I intend to provide an analysis of what might count as "appropriate" perceptual beliefs.

<sup>16</sup> For a factive analysis of entitlement, see Tyler Burge, "Perceptual Entitlement", in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68 (2003), pp. 503-548.

one takes experience to reveal objective features of the world that it is reasonable to justify or revise one's beliefs in the light of experience. Now, some people have thought that beliefs are like inner representations. In his discussion of Davidson's proposal, McDowell assumes that beliefs are like "subjective things" that "belong together with evolving world-views," as opposed to the world outside.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, some people assume that taking beliefs as the minimal units of justification would make our relation to the world indirect. A familiar line of objection points out that, if beliefs are the minimal units of justification, we will need a second-order premise to the effect that the belief is reliably based. Since this premise cannot be delivered by perceptual experience, this strategy would undermine the rational role of perceptual experience.<sup>18</sup>

But this idea strikes me as implausible. To be sure, when one is interested in making one's beliefs *explicit*, one can assert "I believe that it is raining." It is not necessary, however, that, in order to believe that *p*, I entertain an explicit representation of the form *I believe that p*. This would mean that, for an organism to believe something, it would have to have the concept of belief. But this assumption is absurd. Compare the case with other examples: infants usually feel hungry, although they have no concept of hunger. Why should belief be different? When we claim that paradigmatic forms of experience carry doxastic force, we are merely stressing that subjects treat their contents as holding and are prone to act as if these contents were true.

If belief is not explicitly articulated in the context of normal experience, subjects are not expected to add a second-order premise. As a result, we are in a position to see that beliefs actually support the claim of transparency. To begin with, if normal experience is a form of believing, normal experience does not rest on epistemic intermediaries. When I see a visual scene, there is *no distance* between my experiencing the world in a particular way and my taking it to be a particular way. My experiencing it to be a particular way *is* my taking it to be a particular way. This lack of distance explains why the skeptical question "should I trust my senses?" does not arise from the bare consideration of normal experiences. For this question to arise, we would need a two-step story or a communication chain where experience contains a message that may be taken or refused. But, from our first person perspective, the senses do not give us any message. It is simply impossible to weight their rational credentials because they do not provide us with anything that can be weighted. As Dretske writes: "We have no choice about what to believe when we see (hear, smell, feel, etc.) that things are thus and so.

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<sup>17</sup> See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 144.

<sup>18</sup> See B. Brewer, *Perception and Reason*, p. 184, p. 219.

We experience and forthwith believe. Between the experience and the belief there isn't time to weigh evidence."<sup>19</sup> Contrary to Dretske, however, it is not because of lack of time that subjects do not weight perceptual evidence. In the present account, this is owed to the fact that perceptual evidence already has doxastic force.

This idea gains further support from Evans's attractive claim that belief is transparent. In a well-known passage he wrote:

[I]n making a self-ascription of belief, one's eyes are, so to speak, or occasionally literally, directed outward—upon the world. If someone asks me 'Do you think there is going to be a third world war?', I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question 'Will there be a third world war?' I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that *p* by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether *p*.<sup>20</sup>

If belief is transparent, there is no danger in Davidson's claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief, except another belief. If we hold this view, we are not committed to conceive of our mental states as silhouettes in a *camera obscura* isolated from the world.

**Passivity:** conceptualists have introduced the idea of a pre-doxastic actualization of concepts motivated by the idea that concepts operate in an involuntary way. Belief-fixation, however, is also passive. That is why philosophers in the phenomenological tradition have insisted: "belief is a certitude in which we find ourselves without knowing how or where we entered into it."<sup>21</sup> This is particularly vivid when one realizes that beliefs are also things that happen to us. We "undergo" our beliefs. In this sense, the conceptualist is mistaken when he thinks that, in order to get passivity, one has to posit a pre-doxastic actualization of concepts.

The defender of the doxastic account can support this idea by introducing Sellars's distinction between actions and acts. In Sellars's view, deliberating, turning one's attention to a problem, or searching one's memory are mental actions. They are the sorts of things one can decide to do. Mental actions, however, are done *by* performing more basic mental acts. The doxastic theorist can incorporate this idea by claiming that perceptual beliefs are mental acts in the sense that they are not the sorts of things one can decide to do.<sup>22</sup> They are, instead, means by which we engage in epistemic activities. Withholding a perceptual belief, by contrast, might eventually involve mental actions. In order to withhold judging that *p*, one has to weight

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<sup>19</sup> See F. Dretske, "Entitlement: Epistemic Rights without Epistemic Duties?", p. 598.

<sup>20</sup> See Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 225.

<sup>21</sup> See Kevin Mulligan, "Certainty, Soil and Sediment", in: Mark Textor (ed.) *The Austrian Contribution to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> See W. Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations in Kantian Themes* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), p. 74.

evidence for *not-p*: one's previous belief that one line is longer than the other and the new claim that they are of the same length, since it is an illusion. In this model, the subject is presented with two doxastic alternatives, not with a pre-doxastic content that she can take or leave. If this is right, conceptualism reveals itself to be the result of a poor ontology of spontaneity, where the latter is seen as consisting uniquely of mental actions.

**Negation:** for a subject to be able to withhold a judgment, her belief system should have the means of representing negative contents and be governed by the law of non-contradiction. Suppose that a naïve subject were presented with the Müller-Lyer figures. If asked, he could report, "One line is longer than the other." After being informed that they are of the same length, it would be necessary that he incorporates the assertion in such a way that it stands in *opposition* to his old belief. In other words, he must be able to use it in the service of negating the former belief: "One line is *not* longer than the other" or "*It is not the case that* one line is longer than the other."

Crucially, negative contents are not "given" in experience. At best, experience tells us that things are so and so, but it does not tell us that they are *not* so and so. As Millikan observes, negative judgments are not reached by the absence of stimulation but by one's sensitivity to the fact, if it is a fact, that different predicates stand as complements or contraries of other predicates: "Not observing that the apple is red does not equal observing that it is not red. To tell that it is not red I must be able to tell what other color it is instead, that it is some contrary of red or, more generally, that it is non-red, the complement of red."<sup>23</sup>

From these remarks it is possible to argue that negative contents presuppose subjective *doings*. This is something that the doxastic approach can accommodate, given its emphasis on the mind's attitude towards contents. In order to see that two predicates are incompatible, the cognitive system has to *compare* them in *some respect*. As a result, all the materials for belief revision are not directly "given". One is presented, in the best case, with a judgment like "that's blue," but one can exploit that judgment as a reason to withhold one's previous judgment "that's red" only if one takes it *that blue stands in opposition to red*. One cannot be moved to eliminate a prior judgment unless one has considered the item denoted by "that" *in the same respect*. After all, one and the same object can be both blue and red if the colors are distributed in different areas.

**Reason-giving practices:** from a pre-theoretical viewpoint, a *reason* is an intersubjective notion, i.e. a notion that fits better in the contexts of inquiry or discussion. McDowell stresses this point in a number of texts. In his "Two Sorts of Naturalism", he paraphrases the space of

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<sup>23</sup> See Ruth Garrett Millikan, *On Clear and Confused Ideas: An Essay on Substance Concepts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 106.

reasons as the space of *logos*. In the “Afterword” to *Mind and World*, he protests that a non-conceptualist like Peacocke cannot respect that link: “In the reflective tradition we belong to, there is a time-honoured connection between reason and discourse [...]. Reasons that the subject can give, in so far as they are attributable, must be within the space of concepts.”<sup>24</sup>

McDowell is wrong, however, if he thinks that a conceptualist view of reasons can respect this connection. The reasons one articulates in *logos* are assertive ones, not pre-doxastic ones. In the context of a discussion, one never voices a pre-doxastic perceptual reason. Still, one never gives justifications in terms of proper and common sensibles. In contrast, if one accepts the traditional analysis of assertion as the expression of belief, this connection can be easily accommodated in the doxastic approach. Whenever I give a perceptual reason, I express a belief.

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**Abstract:** Any theory of perceptual experience should elucidate the way humans exploit it in activities proper of responsible agents, like justifying and revising their beliefs. In this paper I examine the hypothesis that this capacity requires the positing of a perceptual awareness involving a pre-doxastic actualization of concepts. I conclude that this hypothesis is neither necessary nor sufficient to account for empirical rationality. This leaves open the possibility to introduce a doxastic account, according to which the epistemic function of perception is fulfilled by perceptual beliefs. I develop this claim by showing that the doxastic account satisfies a series of intuitive requirements of justification and belief revision.

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<sup>24</sup> See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 165. See also J. McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, p. 169, pp. 179-180.