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Santiago Echeverri

► **To cite this version:**

| Santiago Echeverri. The Myth of the Conceptual Given. 2010. <ijn\_00452614>

**HAL Id: ijn\_00452614**

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Submitted on 2 Feb 2010

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# THE MYTH OF THE CONCEPTUAL GIVEN

Santiago Echeverri, PhD Candidate  
Institut Jean Nicod (CNRS-ENS-EHESS)

**Abstract.** Conceptualism conceives of perceptual experience as a source of reasons. This claim can be read in two ways: in a *strong reading*, perceptual experience is taken to provide necessary and sufficient conditions to justify doxastic states. In a *weak reading*, it is assumed to provide only the *materials* to form reasons, which are conceived as “hybrid entities” made from perceptual contents *plus* doxastic force. The paper shows that whereas the strong version is in error, the weak version is committed to a dualistic understanding of perception-judgment transitions. This result leads to three further conclusions: (1) conceptualism cannot rule out the existence of non-conceptual content, (2) it is a version of the Myth of the Given, and (3) *pace* conceptualists, only beliefs can justify other beliefs.

**Keywords.** Myth of the Given, Conceptualism, Perception, Belief, Non-Conceptual Content

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## 1. Introduction

Suppose you accept a widespread analysis according to which mental acts or states like *believing*, *desiring*, *thinking*, or *intending* have a three-place structure: a subject  $S$  is related via a psychological act or state  $\psi$  to a propositional content  $p$ :  $S \psi$ 's that  $p$ . Suppose further that you think, as most contemporary philosophers do, that perception is the basis of some mental acts or states. These two assumptions should lead you to ask how perception is related to the cognitive attitudes listed above.

An influential response says that perception is a source of reasons. This framework needs, however, to be filled in. As I see it, the suggestion should satisfy four demands. First, one has to provide a clear account of *reasons* to work with. Second, it is necessary to clarify what it means to claim that perception is a *source* of reasons. Third, one is expected to show that one's analysis of perceptual states enables them to provide reasons. Fourth, one should specify whether by “perceptual states” one means conscious or unconscious episodes.

Concerning the first point, there are two main conceptions of reasons in the literature: they are seen either as structured contents, like facts or propositions, or as mental states, like beliefs. One's answer to the second question is usually determined by one's answer to the third question. Usually, perceptual states are conceived either in purely causal terms or in intentional terms. With this distinction in mind, one can split the original claim into different views: if one provides a causal analysis of perceptual states, it seems clear that they only deliver *necessary* conditions to form reasons. After all, to be caused by an experience is not sufficient to grasp a proposition or to form a belief. The obtaining of some causal relations is, however, a necessary requirement of perceptual beliefs or perceptual contents. By contrast, if one analyzes perceptual experiences in intentional terms, new possibilities come into view. If one takes it that reasons are structured entities like propositions and conceives of perceptual states as providing such entities, then perceptual states clearly provide reasons in the strongest possible sense. By contrast, if one assumes that reasons are doxastic states, and conceives of perceptual states as providing only pre-doxastic structured contents, one is committed to seeing the former as providing necessary but insufficient conditions for reasons.

Conceptualist philosophers have motivated their view of experience by claiming that it is a source of reasons. Consequently, they should satisfy the four previous demands. The conceptualist can construe reasons either as structured entities or as belief states, and he can also conceive of perceptual experiences as providing either sufficient or necessary conditions for reasons. Furthermore, he can be seen as characterizing either conscious perceptual states or unconscious perceptual states.

In what follows, I shall assume that conceptualism characterizes *conscious* perceptual states. Therefore, I will use "experience" and "perception" as synonyms. Nevertheless, as I will explain later, conceptualism can be construed in three different ways that reflect the distinctions introduced earlier:

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Conceptualism</b>		
Propositions	<b>C1. Sufficient</b>	=	Experience is a propositional pre-doxastic state
Belief states	<b>C2. Necessary</b>	=	Experience is a propositional pre-doxastic state
Propositions	<b>C3. Necessary</b>	=	Experience is a non-propositional pre-doxastic state
Belief states	<b>C4. Sufficient</b>	=	Experience is a propositional doxastic state

Conceptualists have oscillated between C1 and C3. In earlier writings, they have suggested that perceptual experience provides sufficient conditions to justify beliefs (C1). In this account, perceptual experiences are analyzed as pre-doxastic states that deliver facts or propositional contents. When put under pressure, however, conceptualists have adopted weaker views (C2, C3). In some cases, they have claimed that perceptual experiences deliver propositional contents that, albeit necessary, are not sufficient to justify perceptual beliefs. This suggests a commitment to a version of the doxastic account of reasons (C2). More recently, a prominent conceptualist, John McDowell (2008a), has suggested that perceptual states have non-propositional contents and, as a result, that they provide necessary but insufficient conditions to justify perceptual beliefs. Contrary to causal analyses, however, these states are assumed to belong to the intentional order (C3).

In this paper I shall criticize versions C1 to C3 of conceptualism and exploit the results as evidence for C4. First, I will claim that conceptualism should be construed as a strong claim like C1, since only such a construal constitutes a genuine alternative to coherentism. Its conception of perceptual experience, however, is unable to provide sufficient conditions to justify doxastic states. In other words, C1 is false. Second, I will maintain that weaker versions of conceptualism (C2, C3) introduce a dualism in perception-judgment transitions that either makes the relations between the two terms unintelligible or is compatible with the existence of non-conceptual content. Since one of the main arguments for conceptualism is the rejection of non-conceptual content, these are good reasons to reject these versions as well. Third, I will suggest that the fluctuation between C1 to C3 is a mark of what Sellars

(1956) called the “Myth of the Given.” As I will explain later, Sellars’s attack on the Given is driven by the idea that one should not frame the mind’s relation to the world in dualistic terms. But this is what conceptualists do. Fourth, I will suggest that these considerations pave the way for a theory that takes beliefs as the minimal units of justification (C4).

## **2. The conceptualist assumptions**

In the next three sections I will present the original version of conceptualism and show why it is committed to the bold claim that perceptual experiences, conceived as pre-doxastic propositional states, are sufficient to justify perceptual judgments or beliefs (C1). The main motivations for this view are of three kinds: (1) the identification of propositional content and conceptual content, (2) the assumption that doxastic accounts of perceptual experience are wrong, and (3) the rejection of coherentism.

1. According to an early formulation, conceptualist accounts identify the content of perceptual experience with the content expressed by an embedded ‘that’-clause preceded by a cognitive verb (see McDowell 1994, 1998a; Brewer 1999). Conceptualists originally took this claim as entailing that experiences are *conceptually articulated*. The reasons for this view are two-fold. First, according to some influential accounts, the content of the “that”-clause is seen as a *structured entity*. Second, it is usually thought that its constituents should satisfy Frege’s criterion of cognitive value, according to which co-referential terms like “Phosphorus” and “Hesperus” express different concepts, given that a subject can rationally hold that Phosphorus is Venus, but deny that Hesperus is Venus. Under these assumptions, if one takes it that the content of experiences is expressed by a “that”-clause, one will be led to conclude that it must be conceptually articulated.

This assumption is not uncontroversial. After all, some people have hypothesized the existence of *non-conceptual propositional* contents (Peacocke 1992, 2001; Bermúdez 1998;

Chalmers 2006). Hence, even if one identifies the content of experiences with the content expressed by a “that”-clause, it remains unclear whether it should qualify as conceptual.

One’s views on this issue depend on one’s characterization of concepts, contents, and propositions. In fact, a single theory might be taken either as a form of conceptualism, or as a form of non-conceptualism, depending on one’s flexibility concerning these categories. Some people have argued that not all contents are propositional, since some contents are iconic (see Crane 2009). Others have argued that some non-conceptual contents satisfy Frege’s criterion of cognitive value (Peacocke 2001). If they are right, this shows that propositional is not synonymous with contentful, and suggests that concepts are not the only entities capable of satisfying Frege’s criterion of cognitive value.

Fortunately, these niceties are not important for this paper, since I shall focus on a broader question: given that reasons require at least propositional contents, how should we exploit the contents of perception in the task of explaining how propositional attitudes are rooted in experience?

In the first part of the paper, I will focus on propositionality as a *necessary* mark of perceptual experiences. My main thrust will be to criticize the widely-held view that ascribing propositional contents is sufficient to characterize the *rational role* of experiences. If one assumes that propositionality is a necessary mark of conceptual representation, the arguments will apply against version C1 of conceptualism. If one denies it and claims that experiences deliver non-conceptual propositional contents, the arguments will apply against these views as well. For expository reasons, however, I will accept the conceptualist assumption and focus on C1.<sup>1</sup>

2. Even if one has a clear view of content, one still has to explain what kind of *attitude* one bears towards that content. This issue has been widely neglected in recent literature (for some recent exceptions, see Byrne 2009, Glüer 2009, and Crane 2009). The reasons seem

obvious. A traditional approach, quite popular in the seventies, took beliefs as constitutive of perception. Defenders of this view defined perception as a *disposition* to acquire beliefs or as the *acquiring* of beliefs. Let us term these approaches “doxastic theories.” The trouble with this suggestion is that doxastic theories are so discredited nowadays that most philosophers do not see them as a live option.<sup>2</sup> This has led to an impasse. Given that doxastic accounts are thought to be implausible, claiming that experiences have propositional contents leads to the view that they are non-doxastic states. But, if they are non-doxastic states, their nature is not entirely clear.

I will be working with the following idea: if perceiving had the structure of a belief state, one could easily spell out the way it is related to other propositional attitudes. One would simply have to postulate inferential links between beliefs of different levels. Nevertheless, given that most theorists reject doxastic theories, it is hard to see how perceptual experiences are related to other states until one provides a positive theory of the nature of those states (see Heck 2000 for a similar argument).

This impasse exerts some pressure on so-called conceptualist theories of perception. Given that belief fixation is usually taken as the conceptualization mechanism *par excellence*, conceptualists have to show that there *is* an *alternative way* of conceiving perceptual experience as conceptually articulated, while granting that it is different from belief. In other words, they have to convince us that there are important differences between perceiving and believing, but still maintain that the former is conceptual through and through.<sup>3</sup>

This explains, to some extent, why conceptualists have developed “pre-doxastic” or “pre-judgmental” approaches to perceptual experience (C1 to C3). They grant that perceptual experience has intentionality in its own right, and analyze it as a function of the concepts actualized by a subject. At the same time, they declare that perceiving is conceptually structured *before* the subject forms a judgment or fixes a belief.<sup>4</sup> There are some examples of

this approach in the work of John McDowell and Bill Brewer. For the time being, I focus on C1. McDowell declares:

*That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment. It becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value (McDowell 1994: 26; see also his 1998a: 438-439).<sup>5</sup>

Brewer is equally explicit on this point:

Of course, the move from unendorsed understanding of these perceptual demonstrative contents [delivered by perceptions] to endorsement of them in belief will normally be almost instantaneous, and only rarely involve anything like a considered decision on the subject's part. *They are importantly distinct stages of the story, though.* The first is something for which the subject need have no epistemically relevant reasons, which in turn provides her with reasons of a genuinely epistemic kind for the second (Brewer 1999: 223 fn 5; emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup>

A distinctive feature of this approach is the claim that perceptual experience *itself* is conceptually structured. One's experience is structured as *p* before one *endorses p* or *takes it to be p*. This contrast is made vivid by the use of different verbs, which are supposed to denote different psychological stages: first, there is a *grasping* or *understanding* of *p* in perceptual experience; later on, *accepting*, *taking* or *endorsing* that content in a judgment or belief.<sup>7</sup> From a classical viewpoint, having a perceptual experience is like *entertaining* a propositional content, whereas judging or believing it would introduce a propositional attitude in its own right.<sup>8</sup> This approach promises to solve the initial puzzle: to show that there is no real mystery in the way perceptual states ground judgments or beliefs, while preserving a clear-cut distinction between perceiving and believing.

**3.** The conceptualist solution is implicitly driven by an additional concern: to show that the mind's perceptual relation to the world is *intrinsically normative*, even though it is not to be conceived in the model of belief. Normativity is one of the main tenets of McDowell's conceptualism: he is convinced that only a normative account of perception would allow us to avoid what Sellars termed the "Myth of the Given," and provide an alternative to Davidson's



coherentism. Since the interpretation of the colorful expression “Myth of the Given” is not easy, I shall leave it for the end of the paper. For the time being, it is important to bear in mind that conceptualism is conceived as an alternative to coherentism and, in particular, its claim that the mind’s perceptual relation to the world is causal but not normative. Hence, one of the driving forces of conceptualism is to make room for a conception of experience that can work as a tribunal, i.e. as a test for beliefs (for a useful discussion of this requirement, see Gupta 2006).

In the next section, I present the main motivations that could drive one, first, to sever the link between doxastic and perceptual states and, second, to find coherentism wanting. This provides us with four arguments in favor of the conceptualist picture. As we shall see, the first two arguments are heavily inspired by Evans’s work, whereas the two others are reactions against Davidson’s coherence theory.

### **3. Motivating conceptualism**

First, Evans (1982: 124) proposed the term “belief” should be reserved to denote a sophisticated cognitive state, i.e. a state that is related to the notions of judgment and reason. McDowell comments as follows: “Evans’s protest is that, even so, the [doxastic] picture connects the content of experience too closely to active thinking for it to be able to do justice to experience” (McDowell 1994: 61). We should be careful not to take this move as a bare terminological decision. In fact, it betrays a substantial philosophical program: the search for the foundations of intentionality *in* conscious perceptual experiences. Evans needed an independent way of characterizing perceptual states because he was after a theory of thought based on perceptual states. This gives some weight to his terminological stipulation and his characterization of the content of perceptual experiences in terms of non-conceptual informational states.

Conceptualists accept *some* of the motivations behind Evans's program. In their view, doxastic theories are problematic, for they cannot provide an explanation of the contribution of perceptual experience to belief fixation. In other words, they seem to take for granted what a philosophical theory of perception should explain: the perceptual basis of a thought's directedness to the world. This idea is explicit in the following excerpt:

The [doxastic] proposal is implausible, because it is not the case that we simply find ourselves with a yen to apply some concept—a conviction that it has application in the immediate vicinity. Nothing could more falsify the facts of the situation (Evans 1982: 229).

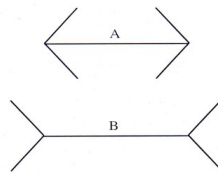
McDowell comments with approval:

This inclination [to judge, to believe] does not just inexplicably set in. If one does make a judgment, it is wrung from one by the experience, which serves as one's reason for the judgment. In a picture in which all there is behind the judgment is a disposition to make it, the experience itself goes missing (McDowell 1994: 61).

McDowell and Brewer agree with Evans's critical point but not with his solution. They concur with him that perceiving cannot be identified with belief formation, since the former should be conceivable as a factor on its own, capable of illuminating the intentional character of beliefs. In contrast to Evans, however, they purport to characterize primitive perceptual states in the space of reasons. This is an important motivation behind McDowell's "minimal empiricism," i.e. his search for the way the intentionality of propositional attitudes is rooted in experience. Brewer (1999) makes this program explicit. He puts forward a two-tiered theory of perceptual beliefs: according to him, there is a privileged class of beliefs with a demonstrative content expressed by utterances of sentences like "this is thus," and a larger class including more detached beliefs with a content expressed by utterances of sentences like "this is *F*," where "*F*" stands for a predicate expressing an observable property like *red*, *square*, etc. Brewer's idea is that the truth-conditions of basic perceptual beliefs could be *fully* explained by their rational links to experiences (Brewer 1999: 22-3), whereas more detached

beliefs would have *part of* their content thanks to their rational links to basic experiences (29, 108).

A second argument exploits an interpretation of the well-known phenomenon of the “persistence of illusion.” Some familiar illusions continue to present their illusory appearance even though the subject does not believe that things are the way they look (McDowell 1994: 60). Let us consider the Müller-Lyer illusion:



If one were presented with these lines, one could attempt to *explain* the fact that one line looks longer than the other. One might even claim that its misleading appearance is owed to the fact that each line has different hashes (Waldenfels 2000: 48ff) or indicates differences in depth (Brewer 2008). Nonetheless, the explanation does not change the fact that one line looks longer. Evans makes use of this fact to argue for the belief-independence of informational states and, in particular, of perceptual states (Evans 1982: 123).<sup>9</sup>

This argument exploits some features of the following situation. Suppose that a naïve subject—let us call him John—is presented with the Müller-Lyer illusion, and is then asked to describe its content. His natural answer would be: “line B is longer than line A.” Later on, an experimenter tells him that he is wrong, since it is a perceptual illusion. In that case, John withholds his judgment and reports his experience in a different way: “line B *merely* looks longer than line A.” These philosophers take the subject’s ability to withhold judging (or believing) that line B is longer than line A as an argument for the belief-independence of perception.<sup>10</sup> Conceptualists accept this *part of* the argument (Brewer 1999: 108, 176). They do not, however, take it to be a reason to hold that experiences have non-conceptual content. In their view, this is compatible with experiences having pre-doxastic conceptual content. After being told that the Müller-Lyer figure is an illusion, John not only keeps perceiving both

lines, but also applying concepts like *line* or relational concepts such as *x looks longer than y*. Hence, given that John is still applying concepts in the latter case, why not say that they had been applied *during the whole experience in a pre-doxastic way*?

The next two arguments are epistemological. In some texts, McDowell suggests he is not interested in identifying *all* actualizations of concepts with the processes of belief fixation, since that would move him toward Davidson's coherentism (see McDowell 1994: 140, 144, 186). One of the main motivations for coherentism is the claim that only beliefs can provide the subject with reasons, for they are the only states capable of being invoked in justifications. A *prima facie* problem with this view is that there is a tendency to analyze beliefs as subjective (or "internal") states. Thus, someone interested in the objectivity of experience, as McDowell and Brewer surely are, could take this as a threat to the task of explaining the mind-world relation in a way that preserves objectivity.<sup>11</sup>

Still, there is another way a belief approach might lead to a version of coherentism. Belief-based accounts of empirical knowledge seem to lead to an *instrumental view* of the role of perceptual experience. Since, in this view, the most primitive intentional states are belief-like, one needs to posit other (second-order) beliefs to the effect that these beliefs can ground other beliefs but, given that beliefs may turn out to be false, these second-order beliefs should be introduced to provide a kind of epistemic guarantee of the rational credentials of the first-order beliefs. The trouble with this view is well-known: either it makes the relation between perceptual beliefs and more detached beliefs *too* indirect or it leads to a regress (see Brewer 1999: 184, 219).

In my view, none of the above objections is compelling. Although conceptualists are right that perceptual beliefs do not "just inexplicably set in," this does not entitle us to look for their foundation in *conscious* perceptual experiences. After all, one might try to ground them directly in sub-personal perceptual processes. Additionally, perceptual illusions inform

us about the relative encapsulation of some perceptual processes, not about the way these processes are represented. Furthermore, there is no clear reason to assume that beliefs must be analyzed as purely subjective items. As many philosophers have recognized for a long time, some beliefs are *de re*, and depend on the exercise of situated abilities by the subject.

Considerations of this sort have led me to conclude that there is a version of the doxastic theory that is able to cope with the above problems. At the end of the paper, I will say something about the persistence of illusion, which is probably the most influential reason invoked against doxastic accounts. My main goal in this paper, however, is not to respond to the above arguments. That will be the topic of another paper. What I want to do is spell out the theoretical motivations behind the conceptualist attempt to develop a pre-doxastic account of perceptual experience.

#### **4. Strong conceptualism**

In the last three sections, I presented conceptualism as an attempt to illuminate the nature of perception-judgment transitions. Its claim is that experience provides reasons for belief. As I showed, this view might be interpreted in at least four different ways, depending on one's views on the nature of reasons and perceptual states. I explained why conceptualists have conceived of experiences as pre-doxastic states. They have disconnected experiences from beliefs because (1) they want to ground belief on experience, (2) they think doxastic theories cannot account for known illusions, (3) they want to avoid the coherentist idea that beliefs are purely subjective, and (4) they want to rule out second-order accounts of perceptual justification.

In this section I want to show how a pre-doxastic state could be thought to provide reasons for belief, and why this model is naturally understood as supporting the strong claim that perceptual experiences are sufficient to justify beliefs (C1).

In this context, it is essential to distinguish two sorts of rational sufficiency: *structural* sufficiency and *warrant* sufficiency. An entity is taken to be structurally sufficient to justify a state if it has the required features allowing it to participate in rational relations. Intuitively, chairs and plants are not structurally adequate. They lack structural features enabling them to participate in justification. Now, states that are apt to participate in rational relations may be either sufficient for warrant or not. Traditionally, belief states are taken to be structurally apt to justify other beliefs, even though some people think they are not sufficient for warrant. If a belief turns out to be false, it is obviously insufficient for warrant. Beliefs, however, are thought to enjoy a structure that makes them apt to participate in rational relations.

The debate between coherentists and conceptualists can be construed as a dispute about the *structural sufficiency* of some entities to participate in justificatory relations. Davidson (1986) declared that perception played no *evidential* role in the justification of beliefs, for only a belief may count as a reason for holding another belief. Since conceptualists have tried to provide an alternative to Davidson's view, they are committed to show that other entities can participate in such rational relations. In other words, they have to show that non-doxastic states are structurally adequate to participate in rational relations. That is why one can present conceptualism as an attempt to broaden the space of justifiers (see McDowell 2002: 134). One cannot meet the challenge if one does not provide arguments for the existence of non-doxastic justifiers.

Similar remarks apply in relation to second-order accounts. Traditionally, these views are motivated by intuitions about warrant insufficiency, e.g. the fact that I am caused to believe that  $p$  is not sufficient to be warranted to endorse  $p$ . After all, the causal ancestors of my belief state could be brain states totally disconnected from the state of affairs it concerns. If, however, one is led to posit structurally insufficient states as the basis of belief states, the requirement to add a second-order state is more pressing. If the basic state is not apt to

participate in justificatory relations, one has to postulate a *transformation* process that produces a second-order state that, in turn, is apt to participate in rational relations. But, why should we think that the transformation process is truth-conducive? A second-order premise seems required to rule out the possibility that such processes lead us astray.

These two arguments suggest that conceptualists are committed to the bold claim that pre-doxastic states are structurally sufficient to participate in rational relations. Only strong conceptualism can provide a genuine alternative to coherentism. In the remainder of this section, I will try to show how this could be possible.

The conceptualist idea is that there are pre-judgmental actualizations of concepts. The latter provide reasons that justify perceptual judgments. The virtues of this approach are clear in the light of the persistence of illusion. Its illusory appearance is passively conceptualized at a pre-judgmental level. Although conceptualists are not clear on this point, experience can be thought to provide an unendorsed content of the form *line B is longer than line A*. This content provides the subject with *prima facie* reasons, i.e. reasons that she accepts by default in ordinary contexts, but which could be defeated by the background belief that she *is looking at a visual illusion*. This example allows us to clarify the conceptualist claim that perception-judgment transitions are rational. The idea is that the subject is, in principle, *free* to accept or reject the experiential content, even though, in ordinary contexts, she endorses most perceptual contents by default. Hence, the naïve observer John will probably accept the content by forming the judgment *line B is longer than line A*, whereas, after being informed, he could withhold it by saying “Although line B looks longer than line A, I don’t believe it.”

At first sight, the postulation of this pre-judgmental stage allows us to conceive of experience as a source of reasons. On the one hand, if perceptual intake is already conceptual, it can be seen as a member of the “space of reasons.” On the other, if John is free to accept or withhold the content of experience, it seems that the conceptualist has managed to introduce

normativity in perceptual experience. She gets this result in at least two ways: first, she assumes that only a theory that distinguishes perceiving from judging can preserve the subject's freedom to decide whether she accepts or withholds a perceptual content. If *all* contents were accepted by default, the very idea of normativity would collapse. Second, she also assumes that concepts *themselves* make a perceptual content *transparent*. To a first approximation, one cannot be held responsible for  $p$  if one is not acquainted with  $p$ . If that content is already conceptual, one has already insured an important condition of responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

How does this proposal work? It depends on how one understands the actualization of concepts in perception. In what follows, I will take for granted that concepts are constituents of propositions. Later on, I shall examine McDowell's most recent proposal.

In the first model, conceptualists identify the content of perceptual judgments with the content of perceptual experiences. This allows explanation of perceptual justification. The link proceeds by *sameness of content*. The conceptualist locates perception within the space of concepts but still preserves the intuitive distinction between "inferential" and "non-inferential" sources of knowledge. Here one would have a non-inferential but still rational perception-judgment transition. This idea can be clarified by reflecting on the nature of this transition: in some senses, one could think of conceptualist transitions as inferential, given the repetition rule: " $p \rightarrow p$ ." There are reasons, however, to reject this suggestion. First, one might argue that the conceptualist picture of perception-judgment transitions does not satisfy the repetition rule. This rule should be interpreted as asserting both the antecedent and the consequent. If we use Frege's assertion sign " $|$ " to mark the assertive force, we could symbolize the repetition rule thus: " $| \neg p \rightarrow | \neg p$ ." By contrast, according to the present reconstruction, conceptualism is committed to a transition from an unendorsed to an endorsed content, something like this: " $\neg p \rightarrow | \neg p$ ." In this view, although the same content appears



both in the antecedent and the consequent, it does not instantiate the repetition rule. Second, this reconstruction enables the conceptualist to accommodate the *defeasible* character of perception-judgment transitions. If they merely happened to instantiate the repetition rule, it would be hard to understand how perception may lead to false belief. But if judgment leads to endorsement, one can try to make room for error as arising in the act of endorsement.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, this picture promises to capture an essential aspect of reasons, since it conceives of them as conceptually structured. As a matter of fact, most contemporary theorists assume that being structured is a *necessary condition* for being part of our epistemic practices of deduction, probabilistic reasoning, induction, etc.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, one might acknowledge with Sellars (1956), Brandom (1997), Williamson (2000), Steup (2001), Pryor (2007), among others, that entities devoid of syntactic structure could not play the role of reasons:

[O]nly things with sentential structure can be premises of inference [...]. For this reason sensings, understood in terms of nonepistemic relations between sense contents and perceivers, are not well suited to serve as the ultimate ground to which inferentially inherited justification traces back (Brandom 1997: 128; see also Brewer 1999: 151).

I shall call it the “argument from structural complexity.” The argument shows that only entities with syntactic complexity are apt to participate in justification relations. Let us illustrate its merits with an example taken from Williamson (2000: 195). Someone in court accused of murder could hardly be declared guilty just by *presentation of* a bloody knife to the judge. Doing *this* would be too *unspecific* to condemn him. In order to decide whether he is guilty, it would be necessary to *formulate propositions about* the bloody knife, such as “the knife was found in his house” or, pointing to the accused, “the knife has his fingerprints.” Merely presenting the knife could hardly provide *a reason* to condemn him. As Williamson points out, it “is a source of indefinitely many such propositions” (2000: 195).

The argument stresses that justificatory (or rational) relations are specific in a way in which entities lacking syntactic complexity are not. In some accounts, propositions have that

complexity. Hence, in those accounts, only propositions can be introduced in justificatory relations.

### **5. Strong conceptualism is false**

In the last section, I argued that conceptualism is committed to construing perceptual experiences as providing sufficient conditions to justify beliefs. This is necessary to provide a genuine alternative to coherentism and its claim that only beliefs can participate in rational relations. I showed that one could eventually succeed by conceiving of perception-judgment transitions as moves from *unendorsed* to *endorsed* contents. In this section, I shall criticize this strong version of conceptualism on the basis of two arguments. As we shall see, these objections are neutral on the nature of reasons.

First of all, the arguments presented so far do not show that the content of perceptual experiences *itself* is propositional. What the argument from structural complexity grounds is the weaker claim that the evidence invoked in justificatory practices is propositional, not that experiences are propositionally structured. Williamson makes this point: “Experiences provide evidence; *they do not consist of propositions. So much is obvious.* But to provide something is not to consist of it” (Williamson 2000: 197; emphasis mine).

One might use Williamson’s earlier example to show that a non-conceptualist theorist can accommodate the requirement of propositionality. Take a naïve realist who conceives of perceptual experiences not as providing conceptual contents but a direct access to ordinary objects like the bloody knife (see Brewer 2006). According to her view, perception would acquaint subjects with objects without being propositionally structured. Propositions would appear just when one forms judgments about that object. This line of reply would also be open to theorists who introduce a “transformation model” of perception, i.e. a model where the transition from perception to belief involves a constructive process or a change from one representational format to another. This is the model favored by most defenders of non-

conceptual content. A non-conceptualist can argue that propositions intervening in empirical justifications are built at the level of judgment, not at the level of pre-doxastic perceptual content.<sup>15</sup>

I am not arguing here for these specific views. What these considerations show is that it is not necessary to conceive of experiences as propositionally structured in order to satisfy the argument from structural complexity. Many alternative models would do as well. What is needed is a model where propositions become *available* in experience, i.e. an account in which subjects *smoothly* move from their perception of the world to the formation of appropriate propositional contents.

Second, although there are good reasons to think that propositionality is a necessary condition for reasons, having a propositional structure is not sufficient for a *state* to be able to participate in *rational* relations. Let me explain. A number of propositional attitudes are said to have structured contents, although they do not play the role of reasons.<sup>16</sup> To take the Müller-Lyer illusion again, suppose an experimenter asked a dogmatic subject this: “Why do you think that line B is longer than line A?” One could imagine a series of answers involving structured contents, but which would yield *inappropriate* justifications:

Wants:           \*Because I *want* line B to be longer than line A.

Assumptions: \*Because I *assume* that line B is longer than line A.

Wonderings: \*Because I *wonder* whether line B is longer than line A.

These examples suggest a straightforward response to the conceptualist. In his attempt to provide a pre-doxastic picture of experience, he has severed a necessary ingredient of justifications: what Sellars (1956) aptly termed their *endorsement* dimension. The intuition behind this objection is that having a conceptual or propositional structure is not sufficient to build up a justifying state. Reason-giving states are not just made out of conceptual contents, but also from what Frege called *assertive force*. Assertive force is constitutive of judgments

and beliefs, but, since the conceptualist wants to provide an *alternative* view to doxastic theories and coherentism, he has lost this dimension from his picture. As indicated above, this line of argument can be easily generalized against non-conceptualist propositional views like the one favored by Peacocke (1992, 2001). If one takes it that experiences deliver unendorsed non-conceptual propositional contents, and assumes that such contents provide reasons for belief, one could be criticized on the same count. Propositionality is not (structurally) sufficient for a state to justify another state.

This line of argument becomes more perspicuous when one considers the metaphor of the tribunal of experience, which conceptualists take as a test for any theory of perception. Contrary to Davidson, McDowell thinks this image is crucial to an understanding of human empirical rationality because it allows for a characterization of belief systems as *rationally sensitive* to the “impact” of the world. According to McDowell, only a theory capable of making sense of perceptual experience as a source of reasons could make sense of that revealing metaphor.

In the light of the previous remarks, it is clear that the conceptualist is not entitled to conceive of experience as a tribunal either. Just take the following example. My father and I plan to go play tennis in the afternoon. In the meantime, I hear on the radio that it has been raining all day long and, as a result, I change my mind: “Since it is raining, we won’t play tennis.” When my father comes, I greet him with the following comment: “It’s raining! It’s impossible to play tennis!” My father, who just came in from outdoors, replies: “No, it is not raining anymore. Are you ready to take revenge?” How should we conceive of my process of belief revision? If I were a skeptic, I would probably walk to the nearest window in order to check if it is raining. If I were to see that the sun is shining, I should update my previous belief in order to match it to the present weather. It seems crucial, however, that I *accept that the sun is shining*. The fact *that the sun is shining* could hardly eventuate in a belief revision

process if I were not to *take it* (at least tacitly) that the sun is shining. Even if the conceptualist is right and not all perceptual contents are “endorsed,” as in John’s case, the point is that only accepted contents can be considered in belief revision. Non-accepted contents would probably be ignored; after all, they would not “tell me” *that the sun is shining*.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Conceptualism and the nature of reasons

In the last section, I suggested that my two objections were neutral on the nature of reasons. One might be inclined, however, to resist this idea. If one conceives of reasons as structured entities, such as facts or propositions, one will be able to hold a strong version of conceptualism. In what follows, I shall reply to this line of argument. For that purpose, I will begin by mentioning the motivations to treat reasons as structured entities.

First, there is a strong tendency to *reify* reasons in natural languages, reflected in the use of “reason” as a complement of the verbs “to give” or “to provide.” From this standpoint, it seems natural to see reasons as *objectively existing entities* one can share with the members of one’s community. Furthermore, as Pryor (2007) points out, we quantify over reasons and also identify them with the content of “that”-clauses. It seems natural to say: “I had *two* reasons to refuse the job” or “my reason for resignation was *that I was tired of my boss*.” If reasons can be given, counted, and specified by means of “that”-clauses, why not identify them with *facts* or *propositions*? This idea seems to underlie the following quote from McDowell: “The point of the idea of experience is that it is in experience that facts themselves come among the justifiers available to subjects” (McDowell 1998a: 430; see also McDowell 1995).

Second, the conceptualist case might seem more compelling because of the tendency in analytic philosophy to individuate reasons by means of propositions. This policy is useful when one provides a rational reconstruction of a theory as a set of propositions or when one

tries to formalize logical proofs.<sup>18</sup> This approach might seem convenient if one is interested in highlighting the relations of logical dependence among different statements.

Here is my reply. To begin with, one should bear in mind what one is invoking reasons for. If one is interested in the psychological role of reasons and the sensitivity of belief to perceptual experience, one needs a notion of a reason capable of reflecting the *subject's point of view* and the *rationality* involved in belief revision. In these cases, it would be odd to abstract from the subject's *attitude* towards those contents. To have any impact on belief, contents must be represented. The point is that not all representings are well suited to play the desired rational role. Only assertive representings can move the subject to change her mind in the light of experience.

This explains, to some extent, why it would beg the question to defend a propositional account of reasons just by dint of a semantic analysis of the reification mechanisms in natural languages (for a recent example of this strategy, see Alvarez 2008). Semantic analyses do not reveal the workings of minds. Assuming that the image of a tribunal is a plausible test of a theory of perceptual experience, and granting that this image shows that one cannot abstract from the subject's attitudes, these semantic tests are defective. To illustrate this, it is important to see that the present point can be made without presupposing any particular ontology of reasons. Let me elaborate.

Some philosophers have compared facts to events and exploited the parallels to show that facts can be introduced in causal explanations. Consider these two examples:

- (1) The fact that Napoleon recognized the danger to his left flank caused him to move his troops forward.
- (2) It was a fact, not a true statement, that the train was diverted that made me late for the lecture.<sup>19</sup>

These fact-involving constructions cannot play the rational role required in the present context. Although the word shape “fact” is used in the two cases to introduce causal relations, it does not show that facts *themselves* rationalize belief revision. Example (1) owes its plausibility to the cognitive act introduced within the scope of “the fact that”: Napoleon’s recognizing the danger to his left flank. If, however, one drops this ingredient, the explanation is defective. It could be that there was a danger to his left flank and Napoleon did not notice it. As a result, he would not have reacted in the appropriate way. Hence, it is not the fact that there was a danger to his left flank that led him to react in the appropriate way but the fact that he recognized it.

Concerning example (2), it provides a case where facts are used to introduce causal explanations. The trouble is that this causal relation is not of the kind in which the conceptualist is interested. To make sense of the tribunal of experience, one needs a notion of causation that *rationalizes* belief revision processes, i.e. a notion that makes it rational for the agent to revise her beliefs. But this is not what the example (2) provides. It gives a case of a causal relation that *exculpates* the speaker for having arrived late. He was late because the train was diverted.

This discussion shows that, even if one endorses an ontology of reasons as facts or propositions, one should allow that the image of experience as a tribunal has an *irreducibly pragmatic element*. It is immaterial whether we reify reasons or introduce causal relations in fact-involving constructions. To decide whether a reason can participate in justification, we have to explain the subject’s attitude to that reason. In ordinary life, whenever I give a reason and I am being *sincere*, I do not give an unendorsed reason. By the same token, if I decide to go play tennis on the ground that the sun is shining, my behavior is not rationally based if I do not take the content of my experience at face value.<sup>20</sup>

## 7. The conceptualist retreat: propositional conceptualism

The arguments presented so far show that C1 is wrong. A major consequence of this view is that one should construe conceptualism as a weak thesis. In other words, one could not see conceptualism as a genuine alternative to coherence theories of justification. In the following two sections, I will show how some weaker positions (C2, C3) could be thought to avoid the previous objections, and suggest that they undermine conceptualism. Furthermore, I will argue that these versions fail to provide an adequate picture of perception-judgment transitions.

An obvious solution is to weaken the conceptualist position by rejecting the claim that experiences *themselves* provide reasons. We have already seen this alternative in a quote from Williamson: “to provide something is not to consist of it.” Byrne reacts in a similar way: “The answer ‘Because it looks blue’ to the question ‘How do you know it is blue?’ is appropriate because it gives the *source* of one’s reason rather than a statement of them” (Byrne 2005: 249 fn 20). This view is also implicit in some texts from McDowell and Brewer. In his “Replies” to a volume dedicated to his work, McDowell describes experience as “an invitation to accept a proposition” (McDowell 2002: 278). Similarly, in a reply to Brandom, McDowell contrasts the claim that perceptual experience *has* reasons with (what he takes to be) the (weaker) claim that it *provides* reasons:

My point about perceptual experiences is that they must *provide* rational credentials, not that they must have them. Perceptual experiences do not purport to report facts [...] experience is simply the way in which observational thinking is directly rationally responsible to facts (McDowell 1998b: 407; see also his 1998a: 439).

We find a similar reaction in Brewer’s texts:

[Perceptual contents] are not yet in the arena of *epistemic* appraisal. For they are not yet something to which the subject is in any way committed. Nevertheless, once grasped in this way, these unendorsed contents do provide reasons of a genuinely epistemic kind for their own endorsement in belief (Brewer 1999: 223).



This solution can be criticized on a number of counts. Just take McDowell's unclear contrast between "having" and "providing" reasons. Suppose we read "providing" in the sense of "giving". How can one give something one does not have? Or suppose its role in providing reasons is that of an intermediary, like a messenger. Here we would face a problem already denounced by Davidson (1986): if experience is an epistemic intermediary between mind and world, one has a picture of experience that risks losing its openness to the world.

In a more charitable reading, one could interpret the use of the verb "to provide" in the sense of "setting or making arrangements for some purpose." This would fit well with the previous suggestion that experience provides *necessary* but *not sufficient* conditions for reasons (C2). In other words, perceptual reasons would be *composite* or *hybrid* entities made out of a perceptual content endorsed in judgment.

According to C2, experiences provide conceptual contents in perceptual experiences, but these contents do not count as reasons. Reasons are formed when the subject accepts the content of experience at the level of perceptual judgment. This two-stage analysis would block the argument based on the tribunal scenario. Perception would provide structured contents, but it would not rationalize belief revision in the light of experience. But there are problems with this approach. On the one hand, it is difficult to reconcile it with almost all conceptualist pronouncements on the rational role of perceptual experiences. Brewer writes that "perceptions provide reasons for endorsement in belief" (see Brewer 1999: 19, 20), which is naturally read in quite a strong sense: perceptions provide *reasons*, *not the materials* for reasons.

It is possible to find similar examples in McDowell's writings. In a previous quote (McDowell 1998a: 430), we found that "facts themselves come among the justifiers available to subjects." This view is consonant with other texts:

[A]pppearances are rationally linked to spontaneity at large: the way *appearances can constitute reasons* for judgements about objective reality—indeed, *do constitute reasons for judgements* in suitable circumstances ('other things being equal') (McDowell 1994: 62; emphasis mine).

It seems odd to write that facts *themselves* come *among the justifiers*, that appearances *constitute* reasons, or that they do constitute reasons for judgments, and insist that experiences are not sufficient to justify beliefs.

Even if one accepts that conceptualism provides the materials to form reasons, the transition from unendorsed to endorsed contents looks *arbitrary*. If perceiving is simply the entertaining of contents, why are subjects *compelled to* endorse them in judgments, instead of casting doubt on them? Why is judging that things are thus and so the *appropriate* (and, if circumstances are favorable, the *mandatory*) cognitive attitude towards these contents? The worry is that epistemic norms are interesting only insofar as they are binding or compelling. If my cognitive system is governed by *modus ponens* and I am faced with the contents ( $p \rightarrow q$ ) and  $p$ , I am compelled to infer  $q$ . But, if perceiving is the entertaining of propositions, there is nothing in perception that compels me to believe its contents. A basic ingredient is still missing.

Let us develop this point in a slightly different way. If experiences are made out of pre-doxastic contents, then they are not in a position to stop the well-known regress problem. Bonjour develops this idea in his analysis of the given:

[T]he proponent of the given is caught in a fundamental and inescapable dilemma: if his intuitions or direct awarenesses or immediate apprehensions are construed as cognitive, at least quasi-judgmental (as seems clearly the more natural interpretation), then they will be both capable of providing justification for other cognitive states and in need of it themselves; but if they are construed as noncognitive, nonjudgmental, then while they will not themselves need justification, they will also be incapable of giving it. In either case, such states will be incapable of serving as an adequate foundation for knowledge. This, at bottom, is why empirical givenness is a myth (Bonjour 1985: 69).

BonJour should not be understood as claiming that conceiving perceptual experience as belief-like is sufficient to stop the regress problem. The claim is weaker. If one presupposes a dualism of a content being given and a cognitive grasp of that content, one cannot solve the regress problem. If judgment is severed from the contents of experience, what does justify one's taking the contents at face value? To avoid this objection, the connection between both ingredients should be *internal*. That is why the objection applies to conceptualism. Since it is forced to conceive perception-judgment transitions in an additive, external way, its account of the rational role of experience is unsatisfactory. *Pace* McDowell, endorsing a given content becomes "a frictionless spinning in the void" (McDowell 1994: 42).

A doxastic theorist could exploit this impasse to defend her proposal. As our analysis of the persistence of illusion illustrates, there are cases in which one can suspend judgment. Nevertheless, the doxastic theorist is partly right when she claims that *the epistemic role of perception as a source of knowledge is internally related to belief*. Whenever I want to justify an empirical belief, I do not refer to a bare experiential content but to my perceptual beliefs. One cannot measure the epistemic significance of experiences by known illusions, since those illusions are cases in which experiences are prevented to fulfill their justificatory role. *Pace* conceptualists, perceptual beliefs are the bearers of justification par excellence. I will come back to this point at the end of the paper.

### **8. The conceptualist retreat: non-propositional conceptualism**

One could develop the hybrid theory of reasons in a slightly different way. In a recent paper, McDowell (2008a) rejects the propositional account of perceptual content and replaces it with the idea of intuitive conceptual contents. This picture can be seen as a version of C3, the claim that experiences are non-propositional pre-doxastic states. I am not sure whether I really understand McDowell's proposal. As a result, my objections will be rather speculative.

As far as I can see, however, it fails to give an adequate model of perception-judgment transitions.

In this picture, which he traces back to Kant, perceptual experience provides contents that, for the purposes of this paper, can be compared to the contents expressed by a use of the phrase-type “this F”, where “F” stands for a predicate like “cube.” According to McDowell, some transitions from perception to judgment involve a process by which this content is made *explicit* by articulating the predicative structure. Hence, the transition would lead from “this F” to “this *is an* F” (e.g. “this *is a* cube”). Although the perceptual content would not be a reason for holding the belief *that this is an F*, it would contain the reason in an inexplicit (or unarticulated) form. Crucially, both “this F” and “this is an F” would count as conceptual, since they would be the product of the same faculty, what McDowell calls, following Kant, the faculty of spontaneity or understanding.

I criticize McDowell’s recent views in my forthcoming paper (2011). In the present context, I want to question the idea of *non-propositional* conceptual contents.

My first point concerns the idea that concepts can be actualized in both propositional and non-propositional format. If one frames the view in psychological terms, this means that a single faculty could have deliverances of quite different sorts. This raises the further question of how faculties should be individuated. Crucially, natural candidates are incompatible with McDowell’s proposal. If we were to follow Kant and individuate faculties by the rules or principles that govern them, it would be strange to qualify both “this cube” and “this is a cube” as actualizations of the same faculty. After all, if the conceptualist is right, the principles at work in the two cases must be different. They lead to different contents. On the other hand, if we individuate faculties by their deliverances, there is some reason to classify propositional and non-propositional contents as products of different faculties. In other words,

there would be no reason to hold that the faculty of concepts is actualized in two ways: propositional and non-propositional.

This is not a knockdown argument. It suggests, however, that one cannot get the idea of non-propositional conceptual contents for free. One should tell a story about the way one individuates psychological faculties, and how exactly one and the same faculty can give rise to different contents. My suspicion is that talking this way easily leads to reifying psychological functions. This is something we should try to avoid.

My second and third arguments are related to the notion of propositionality. Notice that, if this picture is right, the conceptualist cannot exploit one of its main arguments against non-conceptualism: the argument from structural complexity, i.e. the idea that only structured contents can be invoked as reasons for belief. That would be a serious shortcoming. Although perceptual contents are supposed to be conceptual, they do not have the required structure to participate in justification. In most accounts, reasons are *structured entities*, since only structured entities can be invoked as premises. But, if one gives up the propositional view of the content of experience (C1, C2), one cannot preserve its reason-giving role.

Finally, it is far from clear that McDowell has managed to justify the inclusion of non-propositional contents. When people think about non-propositional content, they usually have in mind maps (Evans 1982; Burge 2005) or iconic contents (Crane 2009). But McDowell is after non-propositional *conceptual* contents. As far as I can see, if they are conceptual, there is no reason not to take them as propositional. Let me elaborate.

If one puts forward a theory of non-propositional content, one has to presuppose a theory of propositions. The appeal to the word shapes “this F” and “this is an F” suggests that McDowell has taken *syntactic* considerations as marks of propositionality. This looks like an idiosyncratic move. It is at odds with the widespread account of propositions in terms of truth-

conditions. Hence, it is controversial to assume that utterances of the phrase “this cube” do not express propositions just because they differ from “this is a cube” in their syntax.

A more attractive view is, however, in the offing. One could take a phrase like “this cube” as elliptical for “this is a cube.” Hence, utterances of “this cube” would have truth-conditions in the same way in which utterances of “this is a cube” have truth-conditions. Actually, it seems natural to take “cube” as predicating a property of a salient, bounded object denoted by “this.” In favor of this view, one could say that an adequate paraphrase of “this cube” is: the property *being a cube* is true of *this* (pointing to the same object). Similarly, if you are asked: “What would the world be like if utterances of the two expressions were correct?” a natural reply would be: “There should be a cube in the speaker’s vicinity.” In the terminology of possible world semantics, one could even say that when uttered in the same context both “this cube” and “this is a cube” exclude the same possibilities. Hence, they have the same content.

If these remarks are right, they allow us to take an utterance of “this cube” as being assessable as true or false, as any propositional content is. If uttered in the same context, the two phrases would be true under exactly the same circumstances. Strictly speaking, there would be no difference in the contents expressed by the two expressions, but only a superficial difference in the vehicles (linguistic or psychological).

The present considerations provide a challenge to the defender of non-propositional conceptual contents. The present view provides him with a simple way of explaining the transition from “this cube” to “this is a cube.” The transformation of “this cube” into “this is a cube” is valid just because the two utterances do have the same content, i.e. because the transformation is not *synthetic* but preserves their content.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, even if we grant these remarks, it has already been shown that a propositional structure without assertive force does not have rational impact on a belief

system. This suggests that, if the conceptualist is to avoid the objections presented above, she has to find a different way of including perceptual experiences within the space of reasons. Here the conceptualist seems to extend the space of reasons by means of a “potentiality.” Any item that *can* be articulated in judgment belongs to the space of reasons. Hence, although an utterance of the sentence “this cube” does not convey a reason, it could be transformed into a reason by uttering a sentence of the form “this is a cube.”

It is hard to see what would remain of *conceptualism* in this picture. After all, this recapitulates some of the main features of non-conceptualist views. Let me explain. Some theories of non-conceptual content take the content of experience as richer than the content of a judgment. In these views, perception-judgment transitions involve *selection routines* by virtue of which some features already encoded at lower levels of perceptual processing get articulated. As Fodor (2008: 181) points out, “the idea is that the role of concepts in the perceptual analysis of experience is to recover from experience information that it contains.” Crucially, these lower processing levels are not accessible to the subject. What the subject invokes as a reason is a judgment, but this judgment is based on richer contents. In this sense, those theories combine the merits of doxastic approaches and non-conceptual theories. The demanding notion of justification starts at the level of belief. But, in the case of perceptual beliefs, there is a non-conceptual perceptual basis upon which it is grounded.

Strictly speaking, we do not have access to non-propositional conceptual contents nor to non-conceptual contents. If epistemic activities are discursive, coherentism is right and conceptualism is wrong. After all, non-propositional contents do not stand in rational relations with beliefs. A source of reasons is not a reason. Hence, if non-propositional contents are just a source of reasons, the transition from these contents to perceptual judgments does not qualify as rational.

## 9. The conceptualist Myth

Let us take stock. In the previous sections I located the claim that experiences provide reasons in a broad perspective. I argued that, among the four possible ways of understanding it, conceptualism is only compatible with C1, given its commitment to provide an alternative to coherentism. If one drops this commitment, one can construe it as a weaker claim: C2 or C3. I claimed that C1 is false, and C2 and C3 provide inadequate accounts of perception-judgment transitions. Even if C2 or C3 were right, they could not rule out the existence of non-conceptual content. To be sure, this is not an unpleasant result. But it would be bad news for the conceptualist. He has failed to rule out the sort of view I favor: perceptual justification starts at the level of perceptual belief, and what makes it perceptual is the fact that it is based on sub-personal non-conceptual states.

In what follows, I will develop two further points. First, I will show that the conceptualist oscillation between C1 and C3 is a clear symptom of the Myth of the Given.<sup>22</sup> Second, I will suggest that a way of avoiding the Given is to claim that beliefs are the minimal units of justification (C4). To reach these conclusions, some stage setting is necessary.

Conceptualists insist that experiences *themselves* are conceptually articulated because they want to rule out the Myth of the Given. But here some caution is in order. After all, it is not clear what the colorful expression “Myth of the Given” means. The situation is even worse because there are ways of misconstruing it.

The first misinterpretation is owed to McDowell’s line of argument in *Mind and World*. According to him, the Myth of the Given is the thesis that the space of reasons overrides the space of concepts.<sup>23</sup> The trouble with this characterization is that it makes the notion of the Given uninformative. We are told that the Myth of the Given posits a non-conceptual level of justification, but it is hard to see why one should be blamed for doing that. Furthermore, this definition has no dialectic force. On the one hand, if you are a defender of



non-conceptual content, it is not reasonable to claim that you are committed to a Myth just because you assume that the space of reasons overrides the space of concepts. You can still ask: why is there something mythological in the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual content? On the other hand, McDowell's formulation misleadingly implicates that it is *sufficient* to conceive of perceptual experience as conceptual in order to avoid the Myth of the Given. If the Myth arises from one's incapacity to account for the rational role of experiences, conceiving them as conceptual will not do. The arguments presented above show that representing structured contents is not sufficient for a state to justify a belief.

Another common misconception of the Myth of the Given is to think that it denounces the thesis that the basic materials of perceptual experience are made out of mental objects, usually termed "sense data" or "impressions" (see Dingli 2005: 6, 67). To be sure, some classical versions of the Given take this form. Moreover, some of the most explicit targets of Sellars's arguments in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* are sense datum theories. He also stresses, however, that the Given may appear in different guises:

Many things have been said to be 'given': sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first principles, even givenness itself. And there is, indeed, a certain way of construing the situations which philosophers analyze in these terms which can be said to be the framework of givenness (Sellars 1956, §1: 14).

Sellars then adds: "If, however, I begin my argument with an attack on sense datum theories, it is only as a first step in a general critique of the entire framework of givenness" (§ 1: 14).

One can exploit these remarks to formulate the Myth of the Given. A claim is said to be a version of the Myth of the Given if it follows from or presupposes the "framework of givenness." To a first approximation, the framework of givenness conceives of the mind's relation to some entities as a two-place relation of the form "*S*  $\psi$ 's *E*," where "*S*" stands for an animate being, " $\psi$ " for a relation verb, and "*E*" for a repeatable entity. Quite importantly,

there is no restriction on the sorts of entities involved. *Pace* the conceptualists, conceptual contents and propositions can instantiate the framework of givenness! The following table provides a summary of some of the distinctions Sellars considers:

Cognitive/Epistemic/Normative	Non-Cognitive/Non-Epistemic/Natural
Representings	Representeds
Sensings (seeings, touchings)	Sense data, Material objects
Understandings	Propositions, Facts, First principles

The central feature of this framework is that it is *dualistic*, in a sense aptly described by Brandom (1994: 615): “A distinction becomes a dualism when its components are distinguished in terms that make their characteristic relations to another ultimately unintelligible (Descartes’s dualism is, as always, the paradigm).”<sup>24</sup> What makes the framework a myth is that one describes both terms of the relation in incompatible ways but still *has to* introduce transactions between them. More precisely, suppose one characterizes left-hand elements as *As* and right-hand elements as *non-As*. In the course of developing the framework, one might be committed to the following fallacies:

- (M1) One takes *As* for *non-As*.
- (M2) One is forced, for explanatory or conceptual purposes, to introduce transactions (or relations) between *As* and *non-As*.

Let us use Descartes’s mind-body dualism as an example: it is committed to (M1). Although he defines the mind as *really distinct from the body*, he hypothesizes that the former is located in the pineal gland. The trouble is that only bodily entities are located. It is also committed to (M2): in order to account for perceptions or emotions, it is led to introduce causal transactions between mind and body, even though the latter is not a *res extensa*.<sup>25</sup>

There are different possible reactions to these problems. One might think that some forms of (M1) or (M2) are indispensable moves. That is why Descartes suggested that there

was an interaction between mind and body, even though it was difficult to understand it. Or one could simply take (M1) or (M2) as good reasons to describe all the items in a new, non-dualistic way. One could simply take all elements as As, thereby suppressing the putative category of non-As, or vice versa. This was essentially Hobbes's and Berkeley's strategy. The former suppressed mental substances and the latter material substances. Whatever strategy one chooses, the underlying reason is the same: there was something wrong in the framework; in distinguishing between As and non-As, one fell prey to a Myth.

The framework of givenness is dualistic in a similar way. It distinguishes two kinds of elements: on the one hand, epistemic, normative or cognitive items and, on the other, non-epistemic, natural or non-cognitive items. Sellars's task is to denounce illegitimate moves like (M1) and (M2) between left-hand elements and right-hand elements. His attacks on the Given are of the utmost relevance, since they show that its damaging effects have implications in a broad spectrum of domains: the acquisition of concepts, the epistemology of perception, the mind's attunement to perceptual uniformities, first-person authority, the existence of other minds, etc.

These remarks are intended to show that the conceptualist account of experience is an instance of the framework of givenness. Let me explain. Conceptualists have assumed that the Myth of the Given concerns the nature of perceptual content. This is not right, however. The non-conceptualist falls prey to the Myth of the Given if his distinction between the conceptual and the non-conceptual is shown to introduce a form of dualism and if, in the development of his framework, he is committed to illicit moves such as (M1) or (M2). For instance, he takes non-conceptual contents as different from conceptual contents, but ascribes to them features that only conceptual contents could enjoy. Or he wants to connect non-conceptual contents with conceptual contents in an inferential way, without showing that the former have the required structure to participate in inferential relations. Similarly, the conceptualist can only

avoid the Myth of the Given if he proves that he does not introduce a dualism that commits him to illicit moves such as (M1) or (M2).

As a matter of fact, the different versions of conceptualism (C1-C3) examined above are committed to illicit moves like (M1) or (M2). This is because conceptualism is based on a dualistic conception of the relation between perceiving and judging. In his critique of sense datum theories, Sellars protested when he found that some theorists tried to justify epistemic states on the basis of non-epistemic states (M2). Similarly, in their attempt to provide a pre-doxastic actualization of concepts, conceptualists have posited *epistemically neutral* states (i.e. contents lacking assertive force) as reasons for belief. This is the main conclusion of our critique of C1. Their epistemic neutrality follows from their incapacity to account for the role of experience in belief revision, which requires that some contents be accepted and others rejected. In his analysis of the contents of experiences, however, the conceptualist has abstracted from epistemic *attitudes*. This is clear in the following text:

In my picture of experience, there is no need for cognitive activity ('taking') on our part to equip our passive impressions with objective content. They have it anyway, independently of any cognitive activity we are going in for when they occur. [T]here is no need for any active 'taking' to make experience what it is (McDowell 2005: 86; see also 2008b: 248-249).

Conceptualists think that the divide between conceptual and non-conceptual contents introduces a dualism. Now, the divide between perceiving and taking is a dualism as well. It instantiates the framework of givenness insofar as it severs the attitudes from experience. Sense datum theorists presupposed a dualistic framework when they distinguished mental objects from sensing episodes. The conceptualist creates a new gap between one's prior entertaining of a proposition in perceptual experience and one's accepting it in judgment. He is led to this implausible result since he assumes, without argument, that it is sufficient to be conceptually articulated to belong to the "space of reasons." Since being conceptual is not sufficient for a state to provide justifications, however, there is a clear sense in which *the*

*space of concepts overrides the space of reasons.* If we are interested in providing a rational basis for beliefs, we need more than conceptual contents.<sup>26</sup>

Similar considerations apply when one tries to construe conceptualism in a weaker sense (C2, C3). McDowell has done a great service to philosophy in denouncing our tendency to depict the mind's relation to the world by means of two-component pictures. Construing conceptualism in a weak way, however, is just another two-component picture. It is a picture that leads to the sorts of fallacies denounced by Sellars. To illustrate the point, I shall show how the weaker versions of conceptualism are committed to (M1) or (M2).

If one conceives of experiences as merely providing the materials for reasons, one is committed to (M1). Strictly speaking, this view does not explain how experience can work as a tribunal, since only states with doxastic force rationalize belief-revision processes. The conceptualist emphasis on the tribunal imagery, however, suggests the contrary. He advertises a conception of experiences as capable of preserving the tribunal of experience. In doing so, she ascribes to a pre-doxastic state some features that it would only enjoy if it were a doxastic state. Similarly, both C2 and C3 are committed to (M2). Although they conceive transitions from perception to belief as rational, they fail to ascribe to them the structure we ordinarily count as rational. In the propositional model, judgment is seen as putting a "seal of acceptance" on a propositional content "presented" by experiences. In the non-propositional model, it is seen as an articulation process by means of which one makes a content already given explicit. It is hard to see why someone would count these transactions as *moves* in the space of reasons.

#### **10. Towards a doxastic account**

These problems could be seen as providing indirect evidence for a position like C4: if perceptual experiences have doxastic force, they are sufficient to rationalize belief revision. In order to avoid (M1) and (M2), we should eliminate the spurious category of pre-doxastic

experiences from epistemology. After all, belief states not only have the required structure but they are also adequate for participation in justification relations. As Frege taught us, judging is acknowledging a content as true and, as pragmatists have insisted, acknowledging a content as true involves a disposition to act as if it were true. In order to make sense of the tribunal of experience, we need a conception of experiences that disposes subjects to treat their contents as holding. This is precisely what we get if these contents are interpreted as having doxastic force. *As far as the epistemology of experience is concerned, seeing that thus and so is like believing that thus and so.*

In defense of this claim, it would be necessary to consider two live options. First, one should inquire whether a doxastic account could respond to the argument from the persistence of illusion. Second, one should ask whether one could analyze experiences as doxastic states or whether it is more plausible to consider them as propositional attitudes in their own right.

Concerning the persistence of illusion, I think it is a mistake to assume that one could *generalize* from known illusions to the psychological nature of *all* perceptual experiences. First, we have been given no reason to assume that experiences have a *uniform* psychological structure. This is even more problematic when one considers things from a cognitive point of view: what would be the cognitive advantage of having experiences with uniform structure? Second, it is essential to our experience of persistent illusions that we are not disposed to use them *as* reasons. If a subject withholds judging that one line be longer than the other, she is not disposed to act as if one line were longer than the other. In other words, she is not disposed to invoke her experience as a reason. Hence, it would be strange to use epistemically defective cases such as persistent illusions to assess the psychological structure of epistemically relevant experiences.

Interestingly, disjunctivists have exploited similar considerations in support of different conclusions (see McDowell 1986, Williamson 2000). One cannot assume that the

psychological structure of experiences in the “good cases” is identical to the psychological structure of experiences in the “bad cases.” If known illusions are seen as epistemically bad cases as well, there is no reason to assume that their putative lack of doxastic force should be generalized to the good cases as well. After all, known illusions are cases in which there are background beliefs that block the formation of the relevant belief, preventing it from playing any genuine justificatory role (for discussion, see Pitcher 1971 and Smith 2001).

Recently, Andy Egan (2008) has urged that one could conceive of belief systems as “fragmented” or “compartmentalized.” Similarly, Alex Byrne (2009) has suggested that there is no direct path from the persistence of illusion to the belief-independence of experience. In their view, it is perfectly possible to think that our experience of the Müller-Lyer illusion involves a belief that one line is longer than the other, and another reflective belief that they are of the same length. Similarly, Burge (2005) describes sub-personal perceptual processes as having “commitments.” Although he draws a line between perception and thought, the vocabulary of commitments seems perfectly adequate to characterize beliefs. This clearly suggests that one could extend the notion of belief to describe not only reflective states but also encapsulated perceptual processes like the ones intervening in persistent illusions. From this perspective, known illusions would fail to show the belief-independence of experience. They would merely show the relative encapsulation of beliefs. As Byrne puts it, “inconsistent beliefs are perfectly common” and, if Egan is right, having a compartmentalized belief system has cognitive advantages.

Although the arguments presented here are compatible with these suggestions, they remain neutral on this issue. My own view is that we should reserve the term “belief” to characterize cognitively demanding states at the conscious level. When experiences are invoked as reasons, they are conscious. As a result, it is perfectly appropriate to characterize them as doxastic states. The crucial point is that this does not reduce experiences to beliefs.

First, they may be grounded on sub-personal non-conceptual states. Second, there is no reason to assume that all experiences have a doxastic structure. The claim is just that they have a doxastic structure when they fulfill their epistemic role.

This leads us to the second question. Do the precedent arguments lend support to the claim that perceptual experiences *are* beliefs? Or could a non-doxastic account be invoked to explain the epistemic role of experiences?

Solving these questions would require a detailed analysis of the individuation criteria of psychological states. If one individuates them by their functional role, a case could be made to show that perceptual experiences differ from beliefs, since not all beliefs stand in the same causal relations to action and perceptual sub-personal processes. Consider two cases: (1) my belief that Beijing is the capital of China, and (2) my experience that there is a tiger in front of me. Although the two states dispose me to act in certain ways, one could detect differences in the sorts of actions that are functionally connected with the two states. Seeing a tiger in front of me, I would run as fast as I can. When I hold that Beijing is the capital of China, however, there are no such direct connections with action. Similarly, one could hold that my second state is more tightly connected with perceptual processes than my first belief, which I could have gained from testimony.

By contrast, if we individuate states by their psychological attitude and their content, we could argue that, if experiences play an epistemic role, they have the structure of beliefs. After all, experiences only participate in rational relations insofar as they exhibit two features of beliefs: propositionality and assertive force. To refute this approach, one would have to characterize the attitude or content of experiences in terms incompatible with our concept of belief. If one is liberally minded, however, and assumes that the two features mentioned above are sufficient for a state to count as a doxastic state, we would be led to a claim like C4.



I am not sure whether the distinction between these options is a substantial one. If one assumes, however, that concepts of psychological states are theoretic, one could not expect to solve the dispute by invoking piecemeal arguments. Theoretical concepts owe their meaning to the theories in which they are embedded. Hence, we could only evaluate the two options if we were in a position to compare the theories one could construe on the basis of the two approaches. But this is something we cannot do in this paper.

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### Acknowledgments

I presented earlier versions of this paper at the University of Munich (May 8<sup>th</sup> 2007), at the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Austrian Society for Philosophy in Graz (7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> June 2007), at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Philosophy Colloquium in Evian (15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> July 2007), and at the Institut Jean-Nicod (16<sup>th</sup> April 2008) in Paris. I am indebted to the people who attended those meetings for raising a number of questions that helped me improve the paper. Jérôme Dokic, Reinaldo Bernal, and Felipe Carvalho read a third draft and made useful comments.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I examine McDowell's recent view in section 8.

<sup>2</sup> Among the early proponents of doxastic theories, see Armstrong (1968), Pitcher (1971) and Roxbee-Cox (1971). For more recent defenses of doxastic theories, see Byrne (2009), Dennett (2002), Glüer (2009), Smith (2001), and my own paper (in preparation). Noë (1999) argues for a conceptualist view of experience. Since he claims, however, that experience is judgment-dependent, it is more akin to a doxastic theory. The same applies to classical theories such as Kant's (1781/1787).

<sup>3</sup> To be sure, there are conceptual *motivational* states, like desiring that *p*. But believing is usually taken as the paradigm of a conceptual *epistemic* state.

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I take beliefs as mental dispositions and judgments as mental acts. From this perspective, a belief *Bp* may be instantiated by different judgments *J<sub>1</sub>p*, *J<sub>2</sub>p*... *J<sub>n</sub>p* at different times. I remain neutral on the issue whether judgments are conceptually prior to beliefs or vice versa.

<sup>5</sup> "According to the position I am recommending, conceptual capacities are already operative in experience itself. It is not that actual operations of conceptual capacities first figure only in actualizations of dispositions to judge, with which experiences are identified—so that experience is connected with concepts only by way of a

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potentiality. Having things appear to one a certain way is already itself a mode of actual operation of conceptual capacities” (McDowell 1994: 62).

<sup>6</sup> For a more recent defense of conceptualism, see Brewer (2005), who claims that none of his original arguments for the conceptual character of experience has been adequately refuted. Brewer (2006, 2008) criticizes the claim that experience has “correctness conditions” and argues for a non-representational theory of experience. Interestingly, he still believes that conceptualism is to be preferred to non-conceptualism.

<sup>7</sup> I shall ignore the contrast between acceptance and belief. Although important, it is orthogonal to the arguments in this paper, and it does not play any role in the theories of experience considered here.

<sup>8</sup> This distinction plays an important role in Brewer’s approach. He usually describes the epistemic contribution of perception by using the sentence: “perception provides a reason to endorse in belief.” According to Smith (2001), the view of perceptual experience as the entertaining of a proposition was already developed by Runzo (1977: 214-5): “To perceive an object or state of affairs, X, is, and is no more than, to be episodically aware of a set of *propositions* about X [...] This awareness of (sets of) propositions during perceiving is akin to entertaining.”

<sup>9</sup> Bermúdez (1995: 185) and Schantz (2001: 257) appeal to this argument in order to develop a non-conceptualist view. Not all philosophers agree on this point, however.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted here to Sellars’s (1956, § 14: 37-38) story about John and the Necktie Salesman, and to Smith’s (2001) discussion.

<sup>11</sup> In a more recent paper, McDowell (2003: 158) stresses the point made earlier: perceiving is not equivalent to acquiring a belief, since a perceptual episode can fail to lead to the formation of the corresponding belief. This misses Davidson’s point. Although there can be perceptual episodes that fail to lead to belief, the question is whether pre-doxastic episodes themselves can work as justifiers.

<sup>12</sup> I criticize this assumption in my forthcoming paper (2010). I sketch an alternative picture of normativity (in preparation).

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion, see Glüer (2009) and my own paper (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Brewer (1999: 150-153) introduces this argument. See also McDowell (1994: 7). As we shall see later, the non-propositional version of conceptualism cannot exploit this common line of argument.

<sup>15</sup> One could develop this point by exploiting Dretske’s (1981) distinction between two kinds of representational formats, *analog* and *digital*. From this perspective, perceptual states would have an analog content that does not

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provide reasons but constitutes the source of an indefinite number of (possible) reasons. In order to produce a reason, the mind has to digitalize this content.

<sup>16</sup> I presuppose a conception of propositions as structured entities. This assumption is shared by most participants in the debate, given the influence exerted by Frege on most of them. If one has a picture of propositions as sets of possible worlds, conceptualism becomes false: possible worlds are not individuated by their constituents, and their content is not sensitive to differences in cognitive value. A position along these lines has been defended by Stalnaker (1998).

<sup>17</sup> I am echoing Frege here, when he claims: “How does a thought act? By being grasped and taken to be true” (Frege 1918-1919: 61; 1997: 344). “Thoughts are not wholly unactual but their actuality is quite different from the actuality of things. And their action is brought about by a performance of the thinker; without this they would be inactive, as far as we can see” (62; 345).

<sup>18</sup> But, even in logic, not all philosophers proceed that way. A good example can be found in Frege’s concept-script, which introduces the “judgment stroke” to indicate the force of a content.

<sup>19</sup> I borrow both examples from Dodd (2000: 91, 110 fn 4). In the same context, Dodd gives a number of relevant references of people who stress the causal relevance of facts.

<sup>20</sup> Here I side with Williams (2006: 310-311) and Ernst (2001).

<sup>21</sup> In a recent paper, Tyler Burge (2009: 270) describes some cases in which an indexical or demonstrative can be said to “contain” an attributive representation. In his terminology, “that sofa” *contains* “sofa.” As I understand him, the idea is that a content *C* contains another content *C'* if (1) both are parts of a single syntactic unit, and (2) *C'* restricts (or constrains) the application conditions of *C*. Hence, “she” is restricted to females, “now” to times, and “there” to places.

To decide whether these relations count as propositional is a delicate question. Burge is working with a notion of attribution that is non-propositional and non-conceptual. His main project is to extend the notion of attribution to perceptual processes without over-intellectualizing the latter. Since he assumes that predication is a condition of propositionality, not all forms of containment would qualify as cases of propositionality. I cannot discuss the details of Burge’s proposal in the present context. Insofar as he exploits these remarks to favor a theory of non-conceptual content, however, it is unclear whether they could be invoked in favor of McDowell’s idea of non-propositional *conceptual* contents.

<sup>22</sup> In a recent paper, McDowell (2008b: 208-9) reacted against a similar accusation made by DeVries (2006). I am inclined to side with DeVries, although I am not sure whether our reasons are exactly the same.

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<sup>23</sup> “The idea of the Given is the idea that the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere” (McDowell, 1994: 7; see also his 1995: 408-9). Dokic (2004: 104) accepts this formulation in his commentary of *Mind and World*.

<sup>24</sup> McDowell (1999: 116) makes exactly the same point in connection with Davidson.

<sup>25</sup> Jérôme Dokic pointed out to me that it is odd to qualify (M1) and (M2) as *methodological* fallacies instead of *category mistakes*. There is, however, a difference here. Category mistakes can be denounced when one has independent reasons to think that two entities belong to different categories. For instance, one has independent reasons to think that someone is making a category mistake if she says that she went to the University of Oxford *and* to Oriel College. After all, we know for sure that Oriel College is one of Oxford’s colleges. In the present case, it is difficult to speak of a category mistake for it is not obvious that As and non-As belong to different categories. It is only when assessing the framework that one realizes that the move is illicit.

<sup>26</sup> This assumption is pervasive in McDowell’s writings: “My claim that the dualism is incoherent depends on the thought that the domain of rational interrelatedness is *coextensive* with the domain of the conceptual” (1999: 121; emphasis mine).