McDowell’s Direct Realism and Platonic Naturalism

Roger F. Gibson

1 Introduction

In *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). Professor McDowell’s main concern is to answer the venerable question of the relation of mind and world. He formulates this question in the somewhat quaint Kantian vernacular of spontaneity and receptivity: What’s the relation between spontaneity and receptivity? According to McDowell, two opposite and equally unsatisfactory answers to this query have dominated traditional epistemology. First, *foundationalists* have declared that receptivity provides the Given which furnishes both the content and the grounding for spontaneity’s empirical thoughts and judgements. On the other hand, *coherentists* have declared that the Given, being non-conceptual, is useless for the purpose of providing the content or the grounding for those empirical thoughts and judgements. Foundationalists retort that coherence, in the absence of constraints originating outside of thought, is incapable of explaining how empirical thoughts and judgements bear on the world. McDowell aptly pictures this exchange between advocates of the Given and advocates of uncon-
strained coherentism as a perpetual seesaw: struck by the useless-
ness of the Given, one recoils to coherentism, but then, struck by
the defects of coherentism, one recoils back to the Given, and on,
and on.

While paying homage to both Wittgensteinian therapy and Kan-
tian theory, McDowell proffers his plan for dismounting the seesaw.
The key, he explains, is to give up thinking of experience in terms
of the Given and to learn to think of experience as necessarily im-
bued with conceptual content. According to McDowell, experience
has conceptual content because, in delivering forth experience, the
passive faculty of receptivity *draws on* the conceptual capacities of
spontaneity. In other words, contrary to Kant, receptivity makes
not even a notionally separate contribution to experience. This is
McDowell’s key insight for dismounting the seesaw: since one’s expe-
rience is both passively acquired and (unlike the Given) conceptual,
receptivity may intelligibly be said to provide empirical constraints
on one’s active faculty of spontaneity, the faculty by which one *ex-
ercises* one’s conceptual capacities in thinking and judging.

McDowell’s plan for dismounting the seesaw is a very sophisti-
cated piece of philosophical reasoning. As such, however, I think it
owes more to Kantian theory than to Wittgensteinian therapy (or
quietism). For example, there is a great deal of theory construc-
tion afoot in McDowell’s treatments of receptivity and spontaneity,
experience, direct realism and the world, and platonic naturalism.
The reason for this is that McDowell unabashedly accepts the tra-
ditional problematic of giving an account of how individual minds
relate to the world. This sanguine attitude toward the traditional
problematic is unbecoming a philosopher intent primarily upon re-
lieving conceptual cramps. Thus, McDowell’s plan for dismounting
the seesaw ought to be viewed as a new entrant into the field of
competing theories of mind and world rather than as a technique for
showing flies out of bottles.

McDowell’s general position regarding the relation of mind and
world which emerges from his book could be called a coherent form
of foundationalism (see, for example, 29). It is a form of founda-
tionalism since it allows that certain judgements are warranted by
experience; it is a coherent form of foundationalism since it maintains
that experience can warrant certain judgements because experience
is irreducibly conceptual.

Though I am generally sympathetic to much of what I take to be
McDowell’s general position, some key parts of his position remain
opaque to me. Thus, my remarks below are proffered more in the
spirt of a request for elaborations than as criticism.
2 Receptivity and Realism

As we have noted, for McDowell, receptivity is a passive faculty; in it's openness, it “takes in” the world. Such “takings in”, or experiences, are irreducibly conceptual because receptivity in operation draws on the conceptual capacities of spontaneity in delivering forth experience; thus, there is no Given. This is the insight which allows one to dismount the seesaw of traditional epistemology. Furthermore, McDowell explains that “[i]n a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement...” (26). Moreover, “that very same thing, *that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world” (26). Presumably, McDowell intends ‘is’ in the immediately preceding quotation to be understood as the ‘is’ of identity: a non-misleading experience is identical to a particular aspect of the world. This interpretation of McDowell’s remarks raises two questions: (1) how does he picture the external world? and (2) how does he handle the problem of error?

McDowell maintains that aspects of the external world (i.e., the world of “outer experience”), including those aspects which can be “taken in” via the openness of receptivity, exist independently of all instances of experiencing, or, more generally, of all instances of thinking. So, if there were no experiencers, no thinkers, there would still be an external world. However, despite this thoroughgoing realism, McDowell maintains that no aspect of the world lies essentially beyond the scope of thought. Combining these two features, McDowell pictures the world as a totality of potential contents of (true?) thoughts. Such potential contents are facts, according to McDowell, so the world divides into the totality of facts. Thus, McDowell’s world is more akin to the world of the *Tractatus* than to some Kantian Ideal of pure reason.

However, as McDowell notes, his picture of the world appears to have a certain arrogant anthropocentric aspect: “a baseless confidence that the world is completely within reach of our powers of thinking” (39-40). He attempts to counter this charge by pointing out that

the faculty of spontaneity carries with it a standing obligation to reflect on the credentials of the putatively rational linkages that, at any time, one takes to govern the active business of adjusting one’s world-view in response to experience. Ensuring that our empirical concepts and conceptions pass muster is ongoing and arduous work for the understanding.
It requires patience and something like humility. There is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development. Exactly not; that is why the obligation to reflect is perpetual. (40)

However, merely pointing out that spontaneity is under a perpetual obligation of self-criticism fails to meet the heart of the objection. At best, that response justifies taking McDowell’s picture of the world as a heuristic, a Kantian Ideal of pure reason. But as we have seen, McDowell’s picture of the world is metaphysically substantial. Thus, meeting the anthropocentric objection calls for a justification for identifying the world with the totality of potential contents of (true?) thoughts in the first place. I am not sure that McDowell has provided such a justification.

What, now, of the problem of error? If the content of an experience and of a judgement regarding that content is that things are thus and so, and if that very same thing, that things are thus and so, is an aspect of the world, then how is error possible? How is a misleading experience possible? Just what gets “taken in” in such instances? Surely not an aspect of the world.

So far as I can tell, McDowell does not discuss the problem error (the problems of how we can get things wrong), though he does discuss the correlative problem of scepticism (the problem of how we can get things right). He puts the sceptical question as follows: “how can one know that what one is enjoying at any time is a genuine glimpse of the world, rather than something that merely seems to be that” (112)? McDowell’s short answer is to concede that we cannot tell.

But [he adds] that is beside the point. It would matter if it showed that the very idea of openness to facts is unintelligible, and it does not show that. For my present purposes, the sheer intelligibility of the idea is enough. If the idea is intelligible, the sceptical questions lack a kind of urgency that is essential to their troubling us, an urgency that derives from their seeming to point up an unnerving fact: that however good a subject’s cognitive position is, it cannot constitute her having a state of affairs directly manifest to her. There is no such fact. The aim here is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to. (113)

McDowell is surely correct when he says that the sceptic’s questions do not show that the idea of openness to facts is unintelligible, but by
the same token, I do not think the idea will become fully intelligible until he explains his resolution of the problem of error.

3 Spontaneity and Platonic Naturalism

As we have seen, according to McDowell spontaneity is under “a standing obligation to reflect on the credentials of the putatively rational linkages that, at any time, one takes to govern the active business of adjusting one’s world-view in response to experience” (40). This activity of spontaneity appears to be *sui generis* (i.e., beyond causal laws). Thus, even if McDowell’s account of receptivity is accepted, he still owes an account of the *sui generis* character of spontaneity.

McDowell’s discussion of spontaneity is centered around three concepts: nature, the realm of law, and the realm of reason. The kind of intelligibility associated with the realm of law is characteristic of science; the kind of intelligibility associated with the realm of reason is characteristic of meaning. McDowell places spontaneity squarely within the realm of reason. He then proceeds to discuss four conceptions of how spontaneity might relate to nature; they are: (1) Bald Naturalism, (2) Davidsonian Naturalism, (3) Rampant Platonism, and (4) Platonic Naturalism.

Bald Naturalism equates the realm of law with nature and then tries to show how spontaneity and the realm of reason generally can be constructed entirely from the resources of the realm of law. This approach to relating spontaneity to nature is tantamount to denying that spontaneity is *sui generis*. McDowell dismisses Bald Naturalism as pie in the sky.

Davidsonian naturalism also equates the realm of law with nature, but denies that spontaneity can be explained naturalistically. Thus, unlike Bald Naturalism, Davidsonian Naturalism accepts that spontaneity is *sui generis*. But even though Davidsonian Naturalism recognizes two sets of conceptual capacities, it tries to get by with an ontology confined to the realm of law. Though McDowell is not among those who have a taste for desert landscapes, he dismisses Davidsonian Naturalism primarily on the grounds that because it identifies the realm of law with nature, it disallows his conception of experience—a conception involving a receptivity imbued with concepts. (This criticism applies to Bald Naturalism and to Rampant Platonism as well.)

Rampant Platonism equates the realm of law with nature and the realm of reason with the extra-natural. On this view, humans are
partly in nature and partly outside of nature. McDowell dismisses Rampant Platonism on the grounds that it makes the human capacity to respond to reasons look like an occult power. "What we wanted", McDowell explains, "was a naturalism that makes room for meaning, but this is no kind of naturalism at all" (77-78).

Finally, there is the naturalism that McDowell favors, Platonic Naturalism. Unlike its three competitors, Platonic Naturalism refuses to equate the realm of law with nature. Rather, McDowell expands the concept of nature so that it encompasses both the realm of law and the realm of reason. However, unlike Bald Naturalism, Platonic Naturalism eschews any attempt to assimilate the realm of reason to the realm of law. Accordingly, nature is two-tiered: there is "first nature" which is comprehensible within the realm of law, and there is "second nature" which is comprehensible within the realm of reason. Furthermore, unlike Rampant Platonism, Platonic Naturalism construes the realm of reason as a natural outgrowth of ordinary human development. In this regard, McDowell's basic idea seems to be that people are, during their normal course of maturation, initiated into particular conceptual capacities, including responsiveness to the demands of reason:

Our nature is largely second nature, and our second nature is the way it is not just because of the potentialities we were born with, but also because of our upbringing, our Bildung.

Given the notion of second nature, we can say that the way our lives are shaped by reason is natural, even while we deny that the structure of the space of reasons can be integrated into the layout of the realm of law. (87-88)

McDowell seems to espouse a form of realism, in this connection, when he adds that "[t]he demands of reason are essentially such that a human upbringing can open a human being's eyes to them" (92), but they exist whether anyone ever comes to know them or not. But, if this really is a form of realism it differs radically from the realism which McDowell espouses in connection with the denizens of outer experience, for he says that they would exist even if there were no thinkers at all. Not so, the demands of reason; for if there were no thinkers then there would be no second natures either.

In conclusion, I am left wondering how McDowell might respond to the following three clusters of questions — answers to which might help readers to better understand McDowell's book; they are: (a) Is it McDowell's view that the world consists of the totality of potential contents of (true) thoughts? If so, does he have a reason for holding this view which is independent of the circumstance that it facilitates
dismounting the seesaw? In particular, does he have a reason for equating the world with the potentially thinkable, when that view is taken to be a substantive metaphysical claim as opposed to a Kantian heuristic? (b) Does McDowell view the problem of error (as opposed to the problem of scepticism) as a problem for his direct realism? If so, how does he think that problem should be addressed? (c) Is McDowell really a realist regarding the demands of reason? Is he, perhaps, a metaphysical realist regarding the world of outer experience, but an internal realist regarding the demands of reason?
I am grateful to my commentators for the pains they have taken with my book. I am sorry that I cannot deal properly with all the challenging issues they have raised.

1 Gibson

Gibson says I “unabashedly” accept “the traditional problematic of giving an account of how individual minds relate to the world”. He is right that such a stance would be “unbecoming a philosopher intent primarily on relieving conceptual cramps”. But I cannot see why he thinks the stance is mine. My concern is with why the questions that are raised within the traditional problematic seem to be real ones. It is true that I use conceptual apparatus from philosophy’s past, for instance “the somewhat quaint Kantian vernacular of spontaneity and receptivity”. But this does not justify Gibson’s claim that I accept the traditional problematic. Discussing Rorty, I urge that we should not take just any occurrence of the language of traditional philosophy to reveal a stance within the tra-
ditional problematic. Traditional language can be exploited with a view to exorcizing the traditional anxieties, rather than answering the questions that give expression to them. (See Mind and World, p. 155.)

Gibson describes my outlook as a form of foundationalism. What he means is that I credit experience with a warranting role, and he is right about that. But the image of foundations is potentially misleading as a way of capturing my picture; this is a counterpart to a point made by Sellars.1 There is indeed a relation of rational dependence, of what (if this were the whole story) we might be tempted to call “superstructure” on what we might be tempted to call “foundations”. But just because concepts are involved in experience, and the conceptual realm is a seamless web of rational interconnections, there is also a rational dependence (of a different sort) in the opposite direction. We would have to say that, in respect of this other dimension of rational dependence, the “foundations” are partly held in place by the “superstructure”, and that makes the image of foundations unhappy.

Gibson says I dismiss bald naturalism “as pie in the sky”. That is not right. My point against bald naturalism (at least in Mind and World) is that it does not concede what I can concede as an insight, in the thinking that makes the traditional problematic seem compulsory. Hence it yields a less satisfying exorcism of philosophical anxiety than my alternative.

Gibson ends with three “clusters of questions” that summarize the main concerns he expresses. The best way to respond to his concerns will be to try to answer his questions.

(1) Is it my view that the world consists of the totality of potential contents of (true) thoughts? Yes. (We can just say “the totality of true thoughts”, if we use “thoughts” in the sense of thinkables rather than episodes of thinking.) Do I have a reason for holding this view, apart from its helpfulness in getting out from under philosophical anxieties? No; do I need one? Gibson suggests I do, on the ground that my picture of the world is “metaphysically substantial”. I am not sure what he means by this. The world is everything that is the case; that is, everything that can be truly thought to be the case. There is a permanent possibility of having to decide we were wrong,

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1“Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, p. 300: “the metaphor of ‘foundation’ is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.” A counterpart only, because Sellars’s picture has “observation reports” where I have experience.
and that is enough to ensure that the world so conceived does not degenerate into a shadow or reflection of the norms that, at any time, we take to govern our thinking—a junior partner in the interaction of mind and world. That is as much "realism" about the world as I want; as far as I can see, it is as much "realism" about the world as it is sensible for anyone to want.

(2) Do I view the problem of error as a problem for my direct realism? No. In fact I am not sure what Gibson means by "the problem of error". Earlier he formulates it like this: "How is a misleading experience possible?" But I see no difficulty for me here. How is it possible that straight sticks look bent when partly immersed in water? As I understand this question, it does not express a conceptual difficulty; the question can be answered by pointing to facts about how light travels through air and water. The task of answering such questions in detail is not mine in particular. No doubt there is a different difficulty about the possibility of error, a conceptual difficulty, confronting people who aim to construct a notion of the content of experience out of, for instance, an idea of what the senses are for, parallel to the idea that what the heart is for is to circulate the blood. But I have no such project.2

(3) Am I really a realist regarding the demands of reason? Yes—as much a realist as I am regarding anything (compare (1) above). Gibson suggests I am not entitled to say that, on the ground that "if there were no thinkers there would be no second natures either". But to suggest this opens a gap between my attitude to non-normative facts and my attitude to the demands of reason is to imply that the demands of reason figure in my picture as projections from, or reflections of, second natures. That ignores the fact that my naturalized platonism is a platonism. In the picture I recommend, acquiring a second nature brings the demands of reason into view (a view that may be skewed or inaccurate in some respects). It does not bring them into being.

2When he talks about my discussion of "the correlative problem of scepticism", Gibson says my response to the sceptical question ("How can one know that what one is enjoying at any time is a glimpse of the world, rather than something that merely seems to be that?") is "to concede that we cannot tell". What I concede is that we cannot tell to the satisfaction of the sceptic. This makes a difference. "We cannot tell" (period) risks giving the sceptic everything he wants, whereas I think I am entitled to claim to know, as I sit at my desk writing these words, that what I am enjoying is glimpses of the world.
2 Byrne

Leading into his discussion of the way I try to exploit an oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism, Byrne says he "cannot see how the promised oscillation is supposed to get started". In particular, he does not understand why I think what is unsatisfactory about the positions that I suggest we are prone to oscillate between is that they make a mystery of how thought can have empirical content. I hope the role I have given to "minimal empiricism" in my précis makes this clearer (if not more convincing).

The oscillation gets started (this is the beginning of the diagnosis I offer in my fourth lecture) because we find ourselves conceiving experience in such a way that the idea of experience (understood in terms of impressions, the world's impacts on us as possessors of sensory capacities) would have to function in a logical space that is alien to the logical space in which concepts like that of answerability function. Seen clearly, this conception of experience makes minimal empiricism unavailable. That leaves empirical content mysterious, if we find ourselves unable to abandon the minimal empiricist thought that empirical content is intelligible only in terms of answerability to the tribunal of experience. And I think no one would dream of abandoning that thought, if abandoning it did not seem to be required by a powerful philosophical argument.

In the context of how the natural character of sentience pushes us towards taking the idea of experience to belong in a logical space that is alien to the logical space of reasons, the undimmed attractiveness of minimal empiricism entices us, intelligibly, into the Myth of the Given. To embrace the Myth of the Given is to suppose our thinking can be responsive to both those forces: both the conception of experience as natural, in a sense that would in fact imply that the idea of experience is alien to the space of reasons, and minimal empiricism. But this is self-deceptive. It requires us to misconstrue the implications of conceiving experience as natural in the relevant sense; it requires us to think we can conceive experience in that way, but still take it that experiences themselves, not just beliefs about experiences, can be what beliefs and judgements are based on. (This is what figures in my first lecture as the thought that the space of

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3He makes "a partial exception for coherentism". This looks forward to a passage near the end of his comments, where he accepts that I point to something that really is a problem for Davidson's coherentism. But there too he objects to my formulating the problem by saying Davidson's position makes a mystery of how thought can have empirical content. I shall come to this below.
reasons extends more widely than the space of concepts.) If we unmask this self-deception, and accept that conceiving experience as natural in the relevant sense implies that the idea of experience is alien to the logical space of reasons, then, so long as we stick to that conception of experience, there is no option but Davidsonian coherentism, the renunciation of even minimal empiricism. That is the oscillation I exploit, between a self-deceptive conviction that we can still have minimal empiricism in the context of a conception of experience that is naturalistic in a certain sense, on the one hand, and Davidson's clear-sighted realization that we cannot, on the other.

I picture it as an oscillation, rather than as a structure of thought that simply forces us into the only position so far in view that is not self-deceptive, precisely because the putatively forced move is to renounce minimal empiricism. Davidson does nothing to undermine the plausibility of the thought that empirical content is intelligible only in terms of what it now appears we cannot have, the idea of answerability to the tribunal of experience. (Nor, so far as I know, does anyone else.) So the putatively forced move leaves the possibility of empirical content mysterious; it denies something that gives all the appearance of being a necessary condition for empirical content not to be mysterious—and not by explaining away the appearance that it is a necessary condition, but just by arguing that it cannot be true. If we look at the putatively forced move from this angle, we need not be surprised that anyone is tempted into the Myth of the Given. That way, at least one accepts that apparently necessary condition for empirical content not to be mysterious. Of course this does not suffice for making empirical content unmysterious, and Davidson and Sellars are right that there is self-deception in thinking the job has been done. This is where we came in; the seesaw tilts again.

My problem about Davidson's coherentism is, as I said, that Davidson does nothing to undermine the thought that minimal empiricism, which he rejects, is a necessary condition for empirical content to be anything but mysterious. In the framework Davidson recommends, "How is empirical content possible?" ought to be an urgent question. And Davidson's only move in this area—the argument, from the nature of interpretation, that most beliefs are true—does not address that question. It presupposes that we have beliefs, equipped with empirical content, as they must be to be beliefs at all. That means the argument comes too late to deal with the problem that is in fact posed, I claim, by rejecting minimal empiricism.4

4Of course I am not suggesting it is in doubt that we have beliefs (which of course have empirical content). But rejecting minimal empiricism saddles us with
When I discuss the alarming thought that one might be a brain in a vat, my aim is just to make this dissatisfaction with Davidson vivid. According to Rorty, Davidson once suggested that the argument from interpretation applies to the mere brain that, in the alarming thought, one worries that one might be; the argument shows that even on that supposition, one has mostly true beliefs. In my first lecture, I urge that if the argument from interpretation works like that, it is a poor reassurance that one is in touch with the world. It makes the objects that one’s beliefs are mostly true about, in the view of a good interpreter, merely noumenal in relation to one’s own point of view. My idea was that this brings out vividly that the materials Davidson exploits do not yield a satisfactory conception of how empirical content is possible at all, however well they may do in answering (or silencing) an ordinary scepticism.

Now Byrne grants that I do here pose a problem for Davidson, at least as Rorty reports him. But he suggests that the Davidsonian position can be amended, so as not to have to credit a brain in a vat with beliefs at all. As he remarks, this “fits extremely

_the question how it can be that we do. (A comparison: suppose a philosopher tries to combine saying “Of course it is not in doubt that we perceive objective states of affairs” with the thesis that our intake in perception is restricted to something common between veridical perception and illusion. In the context of that thesis, there is no “of course” about our perceptual grasp on reality.)_

^5^Byrne says he does not see why I put the point by claiming Davidson makes empirical content mysterious (see above). But surely it is obvious that if we have a story, putatively about content, that would succeed at best in displaying the mind as directed towards noumenal objects, we cannot have provided for anything recognizable as empirical content. (And we could put a Kantian thought by saying that a notion of directedness towards noumenal objects is not really an intelligible notion of content at all.)

^6^I am focusing on the second of the two moves Byrne offers. I am less sure that the first is effective. If I have a sceptical worry that I want to express by saying “Maybe I am a brain in a vat”, how would it help to hit me with a doctrine to the effect that a mere brain’s phenomenology would be different from mine? My worry is that this phenomenology (mine) may be that of a mere brain. It is not as if the intentionalist doctrine Byrne appeals to would allow me to say this: if I were a brain in a vat, the difference in my phenomenology would reveal that to me; so, since it does not, I can conclude that I am not. Byrne’s second move permits the Davidsonian response to scepticism, purportedly made urgent in terms of the spectre of the brain in a vat, to be put in this arguably telling way: success in the attempt to suppose that my beliefs are not mostly true, if such a thing were possible, would undermine my entitlement to think I can get my mind around anything (since it would undermine the idea that I am interpretable) — including the supposed thought that I am a brain in a vat. (Compare Putnam’s treatment of “brain in a vat” scepticism, in chap. 2 of _Reason, Truth and History_ (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982).)
well with many of Davidson's writings on the topic". Perhaps it is not an amendment at all; perhaps the extempore remark cited by Rorty was just a mistake. If that is right, I lose a means to make my dissatisfaction with Davidson’s easy rejection of minimal empiricism vivid. But this leaves the dissatisfaction unallayed. (Whereas Byrne implies that if I cannot use the brain in a vat as a complaint against Davidson, that brings my oscillation to a stop.) The fact remains that Davidson does nothing to dislodge the plausibility of the minimal empiricist thought, that empirical content is intelligible only in terms of answerability to the tribunal of experience. Just arguing that it must be false does not explain away the appearance that it must be true.

I shall be in a better position to say something about the detail of the first half of Byrne’s comments after I have responded to Brandom. At this point let me say something general about reliability. From what Byrne says, one might gather that my picture has no use at all for the idea of reliability, but that is not so. For one thing, reliability must be present in the conceptual surroundings of the very idea that someone has a capacity to see (for instance) that things are thus and so. That seems obvious to me, even though I had no occasion to mention it in my book. For another thing, reliable linkages within the organismic constitution of perceiving and thinking animals would surely figure in executions of the good project, scientific in an intelligible sense, that, as I point out in the précis, my position in *Mind and World* leaves room for (though it is no part of my concern in the book): the project of describing the material constitution of perceivers, and more generally beings with minds, so as to make it unsurprising that their interactions with the world are such as to reveal their being percipient, and more generally to reveal their possession of minds.

One more remark about that project, not specifically aimed at Byrne (though his resistance to my book may stem, at least in part, from the suspicion that I leave no room for some clearly worthwhile scientific activities). Engaging in the project can be seen as addressing questions such as “How is it possible that organisms have minds?”, and more specific counterparts, on an interpretation that distinguishes them from the sort of question, formulable in the same

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7This point is in the vicinity of Brandom’s suggestion that I have no ground to reject weak, or epistemological, reliabilism. But what Brandom means by “epistemological reliabilism” is something more committal (and by my lights more sinister) than the thought I here acknowledge to be obvious. I shall say something about this below.
words, that I aim to exorcize (rather than answer). On the interpretation that is my concern, a “How possible?” question expresses a way of thinking that gives the appearance of showing that its putative topic is conceptually impossible. If a “How possible?” question is asked in that spirit, a response in, so to speak, engineering terms—a perspicuous description of the appropriate material constitution—would be beside the point. Perhaps such a response might happen to suggest a diagnosis of what goes wrong in the way of thinking that finds expression in a “How possible?” question of the sort that is my concern, but that would be incidental to its aim. I can insist, on these lines, that what is needed to relieve a conceptual cramp is something different, without in any way debunking inquiry into the machinery of mindedness.

3 Brandom

It would take an inordinate space for me to touch on everything I would like to deal with in Brandom’s comments. I shall have to pass over a lot that I would need to take issue with if I were to attempt a complete engagement with Brandom’s remarks—which would need to include a complete engagement with Brandom’s own recent book.8

The third of the three commitments into which Brandom articulates my basic stance is “that the representational norms that connect the correctness of our thought to the facts, to how things are with that bit of the world the thought therefore counts as being about, must be understood as aspects of the rational norms that govern [the] process of active critical reflection on credentials”. Brandom remarks in a general way that I do not undertake to vindicate my entitlement to the three commitments. About that one in particular, he suggests that I need a story about “just how reference to what we are thinking about precipitates out of (or is intelligible as expressing an aspect of) rational relations among various things we might think (or beliefs we might have), as it turns out, about what we are thinking about”. His book contains just such a story, and his point here is to suggest that, in so far as I do anything worth doing in this area, my book stands to his as promissory note to execution of the promise.

Churlishly enough, I reject this offer of help. My book is not a sketch (with some of the outlines in the wrong places) for Brandom.

dom's finished painting. For my purpose, I do not need Brandom’s story about how representational directedness to facts, construed as involving reference to objects, precipitates out of something in which it is not yet explicitly in view.

My aim is to exorcize a general conceptual difficulty, which shows up in a variety of specific forms. I can put the general difficulty like this. Suppose one pictures the structure of what is a reason for what—the topography of the space of reasons—in a potentially alarming way, as the layout of Plato’s heaven. (Remember that my naturalized platonism is a platonism.) If one starts from there, one can be forgiven for finding it problematic how there could be such a thing as responsiveness to rational constraints as such. That would require that those relations, which constitute the topography of the ideal, enter into determining some of what happens—occurrences in the realm of (as one will be tempted to say if one feels the difficulty in this form) the merely actual, in which actual happenings occur as a result of actual circumstances and other actual happenings. How can the ideal interact with the merely actual in the way it must if it is to make a difference to what happens? To extrapolate from what I say in my book (where the difficulty does not figure in these terms): this felt difficulty can be diagnosed as issuing from a restrictively naturalistic conception of what figures, when the difficulty is felt in this shape, as “the merely actual”. Remember—I say—that second nature, which brings the ideal into our view by opening our eyes to the demands of reason, is nature too, so it can figure in making intelligible, as natural phenomena, the bits of actuality that constitute elements in our lives. Then the felt difficulty evaporates.

This difficulty could arise specifically about the idea of rational responsiveness, in forming beliefs, to other things one believes, or might believe. What Brandom describes as “rational relations among various things we might think (or beliefs we might have)” would give the shape such responsiveness would ideally have. If my exorcism works, it dissolves the difficulty in that specific application.

But the difficulty can also arise directly in connection with the idea that deciding whether to believe that things are thus and so must be rationally responsive to the fact that things are thus and so, or the fact that things are not thus and so (as the case may be). As empiricists, we want to distinguish such responsiveness into immediate

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9That things are thus and so is not another thing one might believe, but the very thing one is deciding whether to believe; the rational relation here is not “among various things we might think (or beliefs we might have)”.

responsiveness, where the beliefs are observational, and mediated responsiveness, where the beliefs are theoretical. It is the difficulty in this form, as a difficulty about rational responsiveness to facts, that, by (in effect) bringing minimal empiricism into question, threatens the very idea of empirical content — representational directedness towards the empirical world — in the way I aim to deal with. The undermining of minimal empiricism poses the threat directly where the responsiveness would have to be immediate, and indirectly where it would have to be mediated. And if my exorcism works, I can apply it at once, without preliminaries, to the difficulty in this form. I can understand, and (unlike proponents of bald naturalism) sympathize, if someone finds a threat here to the very idea that judgements or beliefs are representationally directed towards the facts; but my invocation of second nature disarms the threat. In doing so, it frees the idea of representational directedness towards the facts from the intelligible but misguided conceptual difficulty that is my sole concern about it. For this philosophical exercise of mine, I have no need to proceed stepwise, in the way Brandom suggests I must. I have no need to start by vindicating an employment of the idea of rational responsiveness in which rational responsiveness to the facts is not yet explicitly in view, and only then to proceed to a question about how the latter precipitates out of the former. I can go straight to the latter.¹⁰

I turn now to Brandom’s main charge against me. The charge is this: I claim that my picture is compulsory, but my purported basis for that — the “rational constraint constraint”, on which Brandom represents himself as agreeing with me — is equally satisfied by a different position, in which an externalist reliabilism does the work I

¹⁰The criticism I am responding to here reflects how Brandom misses the significance of a fact that I can put like this: the idea of active critical reflection on credentials figures in my book not, as it does in his, as a building-block in a constructive and (so to speak) context-free account of mindedness (including the directedness of thought at the world), but as an ingredient in a train of thought that poses a threat, which I aim to exorcise. This is not the place to comment in detail on Brandom’s different project and his execution of it. (To avoid being drawn into that, I have ignored the way in which, when Brandom complains that I do not display the precipitating out that I should, he equates representational directedness towards the facts, on the one hand, and, on the other, the relation of thinking or speaking to objects, in virtue of which it is how things are in respect of those objects that determines whether the thinking or speaking is true. To deal with this, I would need to discuss Brandom’s project in his chap. 6, with which I have some sympathy, and his project in his chap. 8, which seems to me to be misbegotten for reasons I shall get close to, but not formulate, in an argument I deploy below in self-defence.)
assign to the idea of rational responsiveness to experience—the work of ensuring that our thinking is depicted as rationally responsive to the facts themselves, in the way that is required for its possession of empirical content to be intelligible. It is just another way of putting this to accuse me of a slide, from the requirement on which Brandom thinks he and I agree, that our empirically contentful thinking be rationally constrained by the empirical facts themselves, to the requirement Brandom questions, that the thinking be rationally constrained by experience.

What this accusation brings out is that Brandom is wrong in thinking he agrees with me on the “rational constraint constraint”. When I suggest that the very idea of empirical content requires that our thinking be rationally constrained by the facts, I mean that to be a case of what I described, above, as “responsiveness to rational constraints as such”. And just because of its externalism, Brandom’s alternative to my exploitation of experience does not give us responsiveness to rational constraints as such. That would require the status as a rational constraint of what is responded to to be in the view of the responder. But as Brandom makes clear, the rational relation between features of the environment and what he wants to be entitled to regard as observational reports of them—the rational relation that, according to him, constitutes the fact that the supposed reports are answerable to those features, and hence intelligible as reports of them—comes into his story only from the point of view of an interpreter of the supposed reports. That is the position’s externalism. (He writes: “From the point of view of the interpreter,... the relation between the facts and the reports or perceptual beliefs is not merely a causal one, but also one rationally assessable in terms of the truth of those reports or beliefs, relative to the independent facts.”) This means that Brandom’s alternative does not, as he claims, fully meet my demand that perceptual beliefs be answerable to the perceptible facts. I need no slide to obliterate Brandom’s alternative from my view.

I am responding to Brandom’s accusation that there is a gap between the thought that motivates my picture—the “rational constraint constraint”—and the picture itself, in what is the obvious way to respond to such an accusation; I am insisting that the motivating thought is stronger than Brandom thinks. Does this merely shift the bump in the rug? Does the complaint now tell against me under an obvious reformulation, to the effect that my stronger

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11In his book Brandom leaves room for conceptually contentful thinking without empirical content; see, e.g., p. 234. I need not go into that here.
motivating thought is itself unmotivated, by comparison with the weaker reading of the "rational constraint constraint" that Brandom thought he and I agreed on? Is the weaker reading enough for empirical content not to be mysterious? I think not. Brandom's less demanding reading of the constraint does not yield anything genuinely recognizable as a rational vulnerability of thinking to the world.

In Brandom's alternative picture, the rational constraints that he claims he can represent the world as affording are not responded to, by the person who responds with what Brandom wants to be entitled to count as observational reports, as the rational constraints Brandom wants to be entitled to suppose they are. Their supposed status as rationally related to the supposed reports comes on the scene for the interpreter, not for the responder. If the presence of a feature of the environment reveals that a response, of a sort whose members Brandom wants to be entitled to see as reports, satisfies a rational constraint on reports as to whether or not things are thus and so, that fact does not come into view for the subject who supposedly responds to the feature of the environment with such a report (at any rate it is not in her view qua responder to the feature). But how does this differ from saying that according to this picture, the fact that is supposedly reported, in what is supposed to be an observational report, is not in the view of the subject who responds with the supposed report? From the point of view of the responder, the response Brandom wants to be entitled to see as an observational report degenerates, just because of the picture's externalism, into a blind reaction to she knows not what. How can it be recognizable as a report of an observation, when the fact it is supposed to report—which just is the required rational constraint, from outside the activity of thinking, on reports or judgements as to whether or not it obtains—is placed in the story in such a way that it is not even available, as the rational constraint it is, to the supposed reporter? If it is not available to the responder as the rational constraint it is, how can it intelligibly be available to her as the fact it is? Those are not two distinct characters it has.

So far I have left unquestioned the assumption that an interpreter can observe environmental circumstances and a responder's responses to them—so that the interpreter can assess the relation between circumstances and responses in terms of concepts such as that of reliability. But I have urged that in the context of Brandom's externalism this appeal to reliability does not help to make it intelligible that the responses are reports of the circumstances. Their status as reports is rendered positively unintelligible, because the
facts supposedly reported are excluded, in their capacity as external rational constraints, from the view of the responder *qua* responder. If it were clear how a response so pictured could be a report, no doubt there would be no problem about an interpreter’s assessing it for truth. But the picture’s externalism undermines the antecedent of that conditional.

It would not help with the problem I am posing for Brandom to note that the two personae, those of responder and interpreter of responses, can coincide in a single individual. The assumption that we can credit the people Brandom wants to see as interpreters with observational capabilities was only provisional. The difficulty arises again about how Brandom can be entitled to the idea that an *interpreter* (or, better, the persona he wants to be entitled to see as that of an interpreter) is in touch with the relevant aspects of reality (the environmental circumstances supposedly reported on, and, now in addition, the responses that Brandom wants to be entitled to see as reports). It can only be *qua* responder — *qua* capable, herself, of responses that are intelligible as reports — that a person who is supposed to be an interpreter comes into our view (if she does, which I am bringing into doubt) as able to observe the relevant aspects of reality: able to adopt, as a result of suitable impacts from the environment, mental postures with the appropriate empirical content. And here as before, Brandom’s picture leaves the fact itself, as the external rational constraint that it is on the activity of deciding what to believe, out of her view *qua* responder. That means that the supposed interpreter’s observational hold on reality is in turn made unintelligible by the picture’s externalism. Let us acknowledge, by all means, that the persona that is supposed to be that of an interpreter can coincide with the persona Brandom is trying to entitle himself to see as that of a maker of observational reports. This cannot help with my difficulty about the latter, if the persona that is supposed to be that of an interpreter is not itself intelligibly in observational touch with any aspects of reality.

It should be apparent that I am not impressed with Brandom’s suggestion, in a diagnostic vein, that the element in my picture that he finds unmotivated reflects a residual individualism. The role I assign to experience (as I conceive experience) is *nothing but* an expression of the “rational constraint constraint” as I understand it; there is no slide that would need diagnosis. My outlook is, I would have thought, rather strikingly non-individualist, at a different point from the one where Brandom deprecates the fact that I do not exploit a divergence of perspectives: I suggest that the very idea of a thinker is unintelligible except in the context of the idea of initiation into
a shared language, conceived as a repository of tradition. When Brandom accuses me of individualism, his point can only be that I do not undertake to make the bearing of thought and speech on the objective world intelligible in the way he does, by appealing to an interplay between interpreters and interpretees. That is the structural idea that, as applied to observational reports and judgements, seems to Brandom to make room for externalist reliabilism as a competitor to my invocation of experience, in satisfying the "rational constraint constraint". It seems strange to suggest that the fact that I have no truck with this kind of thing can be diagnosed as reflecting the absence of this kind of thing from my picture. But more seriously, I have tried to make it plausible that there is nothing to deplore in this absence. As applied to observational reports, Brandom's play with a distinction between what he wants to be entitled to conceive as the standpoints of interpreter and interpretee gives at best a deceptive appearance of making immediately empirical content intelligible. There is no sound basis here from which one could proceed to make mediately empirical content intelligible, by exploiting inferential linkages to observational reports. So Brandom's alternative to my exploitation of experience is not, as he thinks, a serviceable first move towards a satisfactory picture of empirical content in general.

I have not objected to the very idea that a notion of justification might get into our picture of some aspect of a subject's life only from an external perspective. In my book (p. 163) I mention a case, in the sphere of practice. A competent cyclist's adjustments of posture and so forth are not merely triggered by cues to alterations in road camber and the like, but are justified in the light of those alterations. So there is an intelligible sense in which what the cues are cues to constitute reasons for the adjustments. But in the normal case a cyclist does not respond to such things as the reasons they nevertheless intelligibly are. They stand revealed as such only from an external perspective, involving explicit knowledge—not usually possessed by competent cyclists, and not acted on even by those who do possess it—about the mechanics of balance and controlled forward motion on a bicycle. Here we have a division of perspectives, structurally parallel to the one that figures in Brandom's picture of observational reports and their justification.

For an analogue in the realm of judgement, consider the chicken-sexers of philosophical folklore, on one version of the story about them. I mean the version in which the ability is, in a certain sense, permanently mysterious to its possessor. He looks at a chick and says whichever of "It's male" or "It's female" he finds himself more inclined to say. When the sayings are tested against, for instance,
whether the chick grows up to lay eggs, nearly all of them prove to be true, taken at face value as claims in English. But from the subject's own point of view, the inclinations to say one thing rather than another appear as brute facts, rationally unaccountable. It does not seem to him that he is responding to a pair of distinctive looks. No doubt we have to suppose he is (in a different sense) responding to a pair of distinctive cues, or complexes of cues. But, in this version of the story, the difference at the level of cues is not reflected in a pair of concepts at the subject's disposal, connected with the concepts of being male and being female in such a way that he could express them with such phrases as "looks male" and "looks female". Perhaps he can even learn the true theory about cues; but the cues function below the threshold of his conscious awareness, so the inclinations to say "It's male" or "It's female" are still, from his perspective as a responder to the environment, not equipped with reasons. That is what I meant by saying the ability is permanently mysterious to him; even if he knows completely how it works, that need not carry over into there being reasons for the sayings in his perspective as a responder to the environment.

These sayings of "It's male" or "It's female" would relate to the facts about the sex of the chicks he looks at in just the way Brandom says observational reports relate to the facts they report. I can see no reason why these sayings would not count as observational reports by Brandom's lights. Now I would not object if it were claimed that their conformity to Brandom's structure contributes towards making it intelligible that they can be interpreted as claims to the effect that certain chicks are male or female. (To recognize them as claims, we might require them to be put forward with confidence; that might not be intelligible except on the basis of information about reliability, amassed from an interpreter's perspective that the sayer can also occupy.) But it seems plain to me that as I have told the story, these sayings are not intelligible as reports of observation. And I would urge that they are intelligible as claims at all only against a background we easily assume, in which some other sayings the chicken-sexers might go in for (e.g. "It's a chick", "It's laying an egg") would be genuinely intelligible as reports of observation. I would urge that that requires them to be rationally responsive to the reported facts as the rational constraints on judging and reporting that they are, or (it comes to the same thing) rationally responsive to the relevant experiences, as I conceive rational responsiveness to experiences.

I am attacking the idea that conformity to Brandom's structure (of course against a suitable background of inferential linkages to
potential non-observational claims) is enough for performances to be intelligible as observational reports. Perhaps it will be urged, in defence of that idea, that I am wrong to suggest concepts expressible by "looks male" and "looks female" (as applicable to chicks) are irredeemably absent from the conceptual repertoire of the chicken-sexers as I am imagining them. Suppose it is urged that, just because of the conformity to Brandom’s structure, it must be possible for such a subject to form and express such concepts. This seems to me to be deeply wrong about the concept, or concept-forming device, expressible by "looks...". The concept of something’s looking thus and so to one is not the concept of the thing’s being such that on looking at it one becomes inclined to say it is thus and so. It is not even the concept of the thing’s being such that on looking at it one becomes inclined to say it is thus and so with (whether one knows it or not) a right to confidence that if one does say that, and the circumstances are of a kind that figures in a reliable connection between inclinations of this sort and how things are (a connection whose reliability gives one the right to this confidence), one will be speaking truly. That is indeed a specification of a possible concept, exploiting the fact that one can adopt an external assessor’s perspective on one’s own perspective as a responder to the environment. But no variation on this theme will amount to the concept of looking thus and so. The applicability of such a perspectively complex concept does not exclude the possibility that, from one’s perspective as a responder to the environment, the inclinations to say that something is thus and so that figure in the content of the concept may be a brute unaccountable fact, as with the chicken-sexers as I have imagined them. Whereas when the concept of something’s looking thus and so finds application, one’s inclination to say that the thing is thus and so is not rationally naked, from one’s perspective as a responder to the environment. The performance one is inclined towards is equipped with a reason, which is in view as a reason from one’s perspective as a responder to the environment, in the fact that the thing in question looks thus and so.

I undertook to return to Byrne. With some discomfort, he credits me with internalism about justification, and my last few paragraphs should have made it clear that that is not quite right. I am not hostile to the idea of applications of a notion of justification that are made only from an external perspective. The internalism that Byrne is right to find in me is not about justification as such, but specifically about the rational vulnerability of thinking to reality that figures in the “rational constraint constraint”. I hope making that clear will disarm some, at least, of Byrne’s suspicion of my moves.
against Evans and Peacocke, on the question whether deliverances of perceptual states or occurrences, taken to have non-conceptual content, could innocuously play the role of the Given. I do not object to the very idea that beliefs, say, might be displayed to be in good shape from a standpoint of rational assessment (e.g. displayed to be likely to be true) in the light of circumstances their relation to which may have nothing to do with meeting the "rational constraint constraint". I am quite willing to believe non-conceptual content may figure usefully in doing such a thing. I hope that is enough for what Byrne wants. It seems to me to be quite another matter if our topic is what perceptual beliefs are, to use a phrase Byrne sometimes uses, based on (not just displayable to be in good shape in the light of, from a standpoint of rational assessment).

I do not concede, as Byrne says, that someone equipped with Peacocke's theory would be in a position to base her perceptual beliefs on experiences with non-conceptual content. The concession is only that a story with perceivers in possession of the theory would (if it were true, which I do not believe) at least have the right shape to be relevant to the question what their perceptual beliefs are based on.

If asked what one's belief that something is square is based on, one might say "It looks square". I make much of the fact that such a response is articulate, as a ground for supposing that the offered basis is conceptual. Byrne objects that this fact about the response "in no way shows that the experience her belief is about has conceptual content". But a thought with this shape seems to me to cut loose from the project I was concerned to reject, that of making out that the belief about the object is based on the experience. On the view Byrne is defending, the belief about the shape of the object is based on a belief about the experience. According to me, in a picture in which the experience's content is non-conceptual, this second belief is not intelligibly based on the experience. I do not claim that the belief about the experience is therefore doomed to being pictured as merely triggered by the experience. I cannot deny this position the externalistic notion of justification that I have been discussing. So the story can be that the belief is in good shape in the light of the experience. Since that is so, according to the story, in the case of the belief about the experience, it can be so (by an obvious transitivity) in the case of the belief about the object; in being based on the belief about the experience, it is in good shape in the light of the experience. But we have not been shown how to make sense of the belief about the object as based on the experience, taken to have non-conceptual content. It is represented as based on a belief about
the experience. Perhaps that is all that is supposed to be meant by saying it is based on the experience; but in that sense beliefs can obviously be based on anything at all, and there is nothing special about experience. If this is the way the story goes, we are no longer in the business of trying to satisfy the motivation for the idea of the Given.